The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady

8

Piero Karasu

Illustration by
Yuri Kisaragi

8
Euphyllia Fez Palettia
Daughter of Duke Magenta.
Became queen for Anisphia's sake.
Anisphia Wynn Palettia
First Princess of the Kingdom
of Palettia. Yearns for magic and
continues to pursue her research.
The Magical Revolution
of the Reincarnated Princess
and the Genius Young Lady

"It wouldn't be right to make Lady Euphyllia and Lady Anis shoulder everything."
If it means the kingdom's destruction, then so be it—right?
"No matter what I do, there's no saving them."
"If you want to keep on living as a human, you have to cling to your humanity."

“Anis?”
“What?”
“I love you.”
“I know.”
“I am so in love with you.”
“Uh-huh.”
“…You’re so important to me. You accept me for who I am; you want me for who I am—every little part of me.”
“…I do.”

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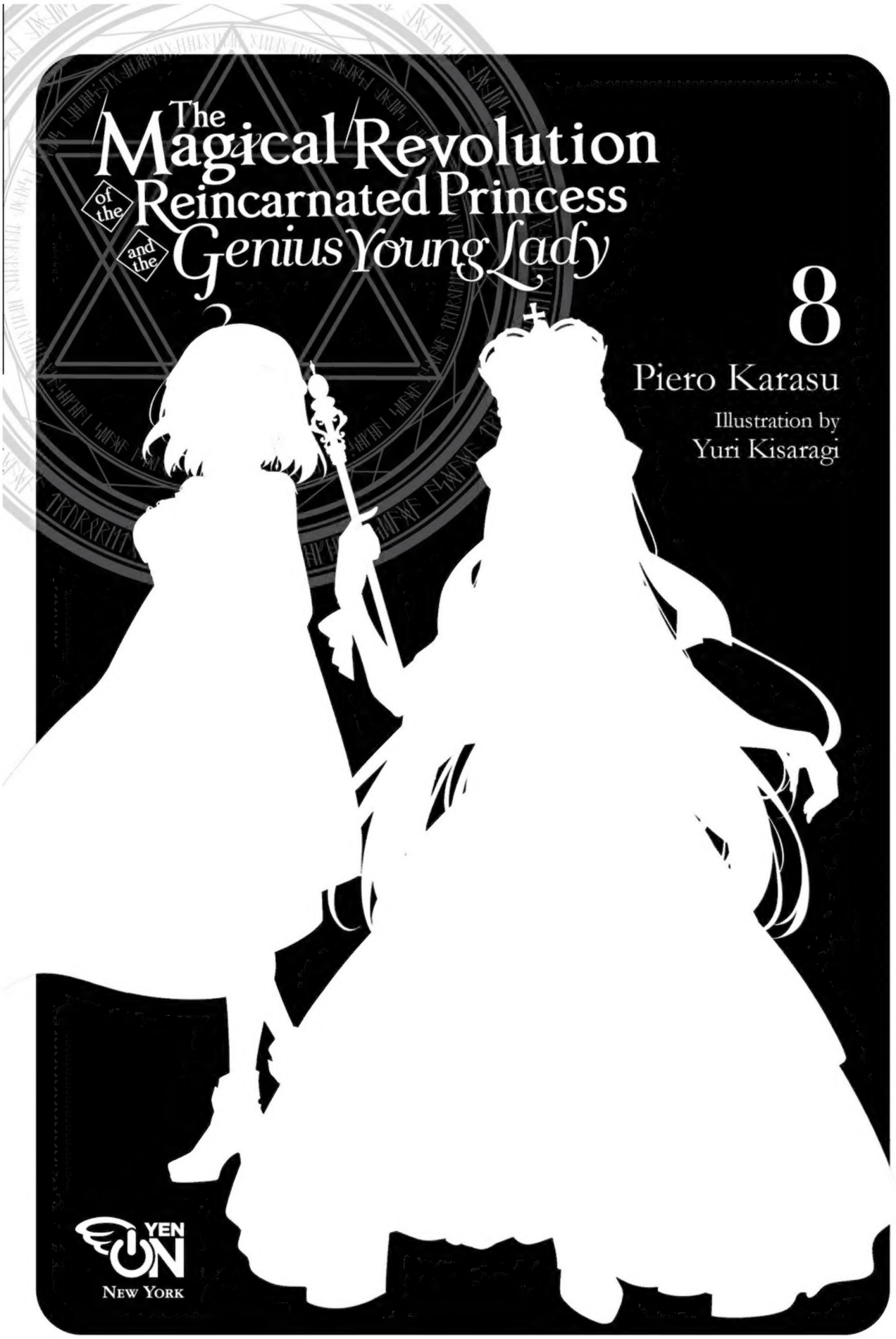
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Illustration by
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The Story So Far

Princess Anisphia yearns for magic and yet cannot use it. After she rescues the gifted prodigy Euphyllia from the commotion of her annulled betrothal, the two young ladies set out on new beginnings. With Euphyllia managing the kingdom's political affairs, Anis proceeds with the construction of a new magicology city for the promotion of her research. The pair's magical revolution for the kingdom's future continues apace…

Characters

Ilia Coral
Anisphia's personal maid.

Lainie Cyan
Was at the heart of the incident in which Euphyllia's betrothal was called off. In reality a vampire, and now a maid at the detached palace.

Tilty Claret
Daughter of a marquis, and a researcher of curses.

Lumielle René Palettia
Immortal spirit covenantor and ancestor of the House of Palettia.

Gark Lampe
One of Anis's research assistants. An apprentice at the Royal Guard.

Navre Sprout
Son of the commander of the Royal Guard. Currently serving as Anis's bodyguard.

Halphys Nebels
Young lady who excels at magic research.
One of Anis's research assistants.

The Story So Far

Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi

OPENING

One fulfilling day after the next passed in the blink of an eye.

I, Anisphia Wynn Palettia, gave a content sigh as I paused to catch my breath between my office duties.

"Is everything okay, Princess Anisphia?" Priscilla asked, looking up.

Priscilla was my personal maid, having accompanied me to the new magicology city. Owing to her keen administrative skills, she also served as my secretary. Her personality and attitude made her a little difficult to work with at times, but there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I could trust her with the work.

"I was just thinking how the new city is really coming along," I murmured softly as I gazed out the window.

The city of magical science, Anisphia. Just thinking of the name was enough to summon a wave of embarrassment inside me.

That name was precisely why I continued to stubbornly refer to it as "the new city" or "the magicology city." Those in our circle, I suspected, had sensed how I felt about it, as I sometimes caught them casting warm glances at me when I used those terms.

In any event, construction was coming along smoothly, we now had plans to expand even farther out, and the residential part of the city—which had been prioritized as the place we all lived—was mostly complete.

With magic accelerating the construction work, it was all proceeding at a frankly alarming rate. Barring any unforeseen delays, it was likely the project would be finished by the end of the year.

Well, that was why I had been kept so busy lately. Still, I had no reason to complain; it *was* fulfilling.

“Things are only going to get busier from here on out, you realize?” Priscilla remarked. “Let’s skip the sighs and proceed with the task at hand. It will all pile up if you don’t.”

“I wasn’t sighing!” I protested. “I was just feeling a little sentimental, that’s all!”

“I see. My apologies, then.”

“I can tell you don’t mean that…,” I grumbled in exasperation.

There came a knock at the door. Priscilla moved to open it, and two figures stepped inside—Garkie and Navre.

“Commander Anisphia,” Navre said by way of a greeting.

“We’ve returned!” Garkie added.

“Welcome back, you two,” I said.

“Good work on your inspection,” Priscilla called out, prompting Navre to shrink back slightly.

“It wasn’t quite an inspection… More of a preliminary survey,” he muttered.

“How was my new residence?” I asked.

“It’s all coming along smoothly,” Garkie said.

Indeed, I had plans to move into my new home in the not-too-distant future.

I was currently living in the fort, which served as our base of operations, but there were certain issues with my staying here long-term.

First of all, the fort was meant only as a temporary base, and it had been built on the assumption that it would be drastically renovated further down the road. For that reason, it wasn’t regarded as suitable accommodations for a member of the royal family to use on a regular basis.

And so, with most major construction settling down, I had issued instructions for work to begin on a mansion for myself. In any event, the fort was starting to feel a little cramped, and Lieutenant Commander Dragus was always going on about finding something more suitable, so the timing seemed to work out well enough.

“As a member of the royal family, I have to keep up appearances. Don’t I, now?”

“You’re still not happy about having your own mansion?” Priscilla asked.

“It’s more I feel kind of guilty, I guess? Like I’m just adding to everyone’s workload, you know?”

“It was always going to be a necessity. It was simply moved a little earlier in the schedule. You realize if you stay here in the fort forever, it will affect Baron Cyan’s reputation.”

“I guess I can’t get away with saying I don’t really care about my own reputation, huh…”

“You’re royalty, Commander Anisphia. You’ll just have to accept it.”

Simply put, if I stayed here indefinitely, it would call into question Baron Cyan’s ability to lead the development efforts. People might even start questioning his level of respect for the royal family.

For that reason, I knew I couldn’t stay holed up here forever. I needed to start paying attention to these sorts of social details as well.

Well, to be perfectly honest, I was leaving the mansion’s construction to the experts. They did ask me if I had any requests, but I was hesitant to suggest anything too eccentric or extravagant. It wasn’t like I was really chasing after all the trappings of royalty anyway.

That was why I wanted Navre’s assessment of the building from a defensive perspective—a reminder that I had to keep in mind not only appearances, but security as well.

I didn’t want to end up feeling constricted, but if everyone else was concerned for my safety, I would just have to accept it. And I did appreciate their efforts to take my own wishes into account as much as possible. Heck, I probably should have been thanking them for being so flexible.

“I didn’t see anything wrong with the mansion, as such, but are you sure you don’t have any personal requests?” Navre asked.

“Yep. It wouldn’t be fitting for a member of the royal family if I started

demanding too much."

"You're pretty frugal for royalty, Lady Anis," Garkie remarked.

"That's not entirely correct, Master Gark," Priscilla said as she heaved a sigh. "She's indifferent to extravagance, has no appetite for matters outside her interests, and believes she can do everything by herself."

"…Priscilla? Even if it's true, words can still hurt, you know?" I said quietly.

"I'm pleased to hear you don't dispute my assessment."

"Hey!"

"…Maybe it's for the best you didn't ask for anything, then," Navre added, apparently unsure what else to say.

They didn't need to point that out! I knew full well I wasn't your typical royal!

At that moment, Charnée stepped into the room with a cart of freshly brewed tea.

Seeing her as cheerful and energetic as ever rejuvenated me, too. She was young enough that you could still call her a child, but she was hard at work giving life her all in this remote and inconvenient place.

"I've brought tea, Your Highness! How about you take a break…?" She paused for a moment. "Oh? Is something wrong?"

"No, it's fine. Do you have enough for everyone?" I asked.

"Of course! I'll see to it!" she replied cheerfully as she briskly set about preparing the tea.

In the meantime, the rest of us took our seats around the table.

"It's not like I *don't* want to act in a way befitting my position, but it's not something you can master instantly," I tried explaining. "I mean, I've been living shut away in the detached palace for years…"

I was doing my best to meet the expectations of everyone around me, but people couldn't just change in the blink of an eye. That was true for me as much as it was for everyone else.

That was why I kept my requests to myself. Given what was expected of me

as a royal, I didn't want to interfere unnecessarily. I would probably end up making everyone work twice as hard…

"When you put it that way, I don't know what to say…," Navre said with a frown.

"The same goes for me, too," I answered with a forced laugh. "Besides, so long as we're keeping an eye to the future, I think it would be too hard to incorporate all my requests."

"The future? What about the future?" Navre asked, and his frown deepened. After a moment, his expression turned pensive as he tilted his head to one side in thought.

"I'm sure I won't be based here in the magicology city forever," I said. "I'll no doubt have to hand the mansion over to my successor one day, so I don't want to insist on anything too unconventional."

Navre's eyes widened in surprise, as if to say that was the last thing he had been expecting me to come out with.

"You haven't been knight commander and head of the Magicology Laboratory for even a whole year, and you're already thinking about your successor? It's a little early to be worrying over that, don't you think…?" he asked, unable to hide his confusion.

Of course, I knew it was too early to be making plans. It was just, for a number of reasons, I couldn't put the thought to one side.

"To be honest, I'm not sure when it will be time for me to step down from my current position. That's why I want to be prepared. For better or for worse, my future depends on Euphie."

"…Are you saying you intend to leave when Her Majesty steps down from the throne?"

"That's the plan, yes. I suspect she'll abdicate once she feels someone else is capable of taking over from her, so I want to make sure there's someone here to occupy my position as soon as possible. Just to be ready when the time comes."

“Is Queen Euphyllia really going to abdicate so soon?”

“Not for a few years, I’m sure. But I don’t think it’s too far off, either. And that’s for the best, if you ask me.”

“Why do you say that?” Navre asked. His expression wasn’t dissatisfied, exactly, but he didn’t seem to accept what I was saying. “The people have greatly appreciated the reforms you and Her Majesty have initiated. It’s true that such sentiment isn’t fully shared by the nobility, but it’s only a matter of time. I’m sure a great many people would like the two of you to continue reigning for a long time to come.”

Well, Euphie’s reputation as queen was glowing, that was for sure. I understood why people would want her to remain in power for as long as possible to ensure the realm’s long-term stability.

“That’s precisely why. The reason we’re thinking of retiring early is because, for better and for worse, our influence is just too great.”

“Your influence?” Charnée repeated, cocking her head to one side as if to say she didn’t quite follow.

Navre must have grasped my meaning, as his expression turned sullen.

“I have to admit, I still have mixed feelings about Euphie becoming queen,” I continued. “She was never originally in line to take to the throne, and I know it might have been necessary to unify the country, but I’m afraid it could end up creating issues as well.”

“What kind of issues…?”

“The spirit covenant she entered into to become queen has its own dangers. She understands the risks, just like I do.”

A spirit covenant was a legendary achievement, the same feat carried out by the founder of the Kingdom of Palettia himself.

Euphie journeyed down that path for the sake of the crown, but there was every risk it could encourage the nobles to lean even more heavily on their spiritualist beliefs. If that happened, their increased sense of privilege could ultimately widen the rift between the aristocracy and the common people. If

that divide kept building, there was no telling when the anger of the common folk would finally erupt, plunging the kingdom into chaos.

Even more problematic was the increasing number of nobles who openly spoke ill of the royal family, stretching back to my father's time.

There were several factors behind that. First, my father himself was never originally meant to succeed to the throne. Then, of course, came my inability to use magic. And there was the fact that Allie's talents were considered inferior to Euphie's, leading people to look down on him. As a result, some nobles went all in with their faith and even tried manipulating the royal family to their own ends.

Because of that, Allie, who was supposed to be the legitimate heir, lost control and plotted to usurp the throne; he had planned to correct the distortions plaguing society by force using the powers of vampires.

I managed to stop him, but he was banished to the frontier to account for his crimes.

As far as the spiritualist faith was concerned, I wasn't qualified to serve as queen. If Euphie hadn't stepped in, the situation would no doubt be even worse by now.

The belief in spirits was fundamental in uniting the country, but with the nobility growing ever more corrupt, the realm was heading into uncertain territory. My father had done his best to address the issue, but a resolution had yet to be found. I believed that was our task—mine and Euphie's.

"We need to find a way to change people's perceptions. If we don't, we'll never bridge the gap between the aristocracy and the common folk. That division risks bringing the country to ruin, so it simply can't be overlooked."

"You're saying you want to change the nobility's mindset?" Priscilla asked.

I nodded. "Well, I guess you could put it that way."

In the end, that seemed the only possible solution.

Up till now, the nobility had taken great pride in their role defending the realm, but that sense of prestige was leading to their own decline.

Yes, that was the fundamental cause of all these issues. In order to resolve it, drastic measures were needed to disrupt the status quo. And we had those in my magicology and Euphie's spirit covenant.

"With Euphie acceding to the throne, the Kingdom of Palettia had no choice but to make significant policy changes. If it didn't, everything would continue to fester."

"It's moving in a good direction, then, isn't it?" Garkie asked, his head tilted inquisitively.

I smiled wryly. "I guess we won't know for sure until we see the results."

"So that's how it is…?"

"I think there will still be problems even after we've finished our reforms. For instance, commoners could rise to power using magical tools, and then nobles with their inherent powers might end up being ostracized as heretics."

Charnée gawked at this response, and none of the others said anything to dispute my assessment. They must have all recognized that it was a distinct possibility. In fact, I remembered discussing something like this a while back. Maybe around the time I started patching things up with the Ministry of the Arcane?

Euphie and I might live unnaturally prolonged lives, but that didn't mean we could reign forever. The country belonged to those living in the present. Which meant we all had to decide our own paths forward.

We both needed to prepare for that eventuality, to one day step back. If we didn't, we would repeat the same missteps as those strict adherents of the spiritualist faith.

"Basically," Garkie began, his arms crossed and his head tilted to one side, "we need you and Lady Euphyllia to solve the bigger problems, but we can't keep relying on you forever?"

He was right, of course, but I couldn't stop myself from breaking into a smile at the strange way he was sitting.

"That's exactly what I mean, Garkie. When you think about it, it'd be like

overdosing on medicine. You need just the right amount."

"So you're like a powerful drug? That's a weird way to describe yourself…"

"You and Queen Euphyllia are certainly powerful enough to destroy the entire country, Your Highness," Priscilla observed with a straight face.

The rest of us, myself included, were left grimacing at this last remark.

"There's no need to go that far, Priscilla…," I groaned.

"But it's true, is it not?" she continued without batting an eye. "The status quo only seems to be holding for now because neither of you actually wants chaos."

"I suppose you could put it that way, but still…," Navre muttered with a solemn expression.

For my part, I almost broke into a smile, but I fought to keep my amusement under wraps.

"Princess Anisphia has the support of the people, and if she wanted, she could no doubt rally them to abolish the nobility altogether. With her spirit covenant, Queen Euphyllia, on the other hand, draws on the legend of the kingdom's very foundations. If she were to wield her power to the fullest, how many do you think would dare oppose her?" Priscilla asked.

"Um… You are going a bit too far *now*, don't you think…?" Navre asked in an effort to slow her down.

"Am I? Isn't that why you and Queen Euphyllia are considering stepping down so soon, Your Highness?"

"That's…true, I suppose…," I murmured.

Yes, Priscilla sure was talented, but her sharp tongue caused us all no end of trouble…

"Well, things are better than if I took the throne, right? The country would be spiraling out of control if I were at the top. The situation before Euphie's accession might have looked relatively calm from the outside, but believe me, it was dire. What we need now is to steer the country away from crisis and toward stability."

“A most noble aspiration,” Priscilla remarked.

“Your compliments always come off as kind of sarcastic, you know…?” I pointed out.

“It must be your imagination.”

“Sure it is…,” Garkie muttered.

“Did you say something, Master Gark?” Priscilla asked with a sidelong glance.

“No, nothing!” he stammered, straightening his back.

This was becoming a regular exchange between these two, so I liked to think it meant they were starting to trust each other.

“As Her Highness said, the current peace holds because of Queen Euphyllia’s spirit covenant. It’s only natural to believe that it was Her Majesty who saved the country. She’s like a real-life goddess.”

“You really do admire her, don’t you, Priscilla…?” Navre asked.

“That’s right. I’m prepared to devote my whole life to her.”

“Now, that’s heavy…”

“And that’s hardly an appropriate sentiment to say about a woman, now, is it?” Priscilla scolded him.

“Huh?! Come on, you could tell I wasn’t talking about anyone’s weight!” Navre cried out, holding his head in his hands as if he was wrestling with a headache.

“You can treat me like that, Master Navre, but I’m so envious that you and Queen Euphyllia are former schoolmates that I could spit poison.”

“Enough with the weird threats…! And don’t bring up our time at the academy…!”

“Yes, I hear it’s a part of your past you’d rather forget…”

“A cause for lifelong shame…”

Come to think about it, Navre was the second youngest in our group after Charnée. I sometimes forgot that, seeing as he was usually so dependable.

All of a sudden, I caught Charnée murmuring something under her breath: "Queen Euphyllia's time as a student? I wish I knew what she was like before she became queen…"

"Me too," Garkie added.

"Are you the only one here who knew her as a student, Master Navre?" Charnée asked.

"In that case, Master Navre, why don't you share some stories about her from your time as students?"

"H-hold on! How did we get on this topic?!"

"Charnée said she was curious…"

"Oh. Um, well, I don't want to cause any arguments… I'm sorry, really," Charnée said, bowing her head in apology.

This, however, only made Navre even more flustered. "Y-you don't need to apologize… I just felt a little uncomfortable, seeing as I made so many stupid mistakes back then…"

"P-please, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to…!"

"Really, it isn't a problem… Anyway, I don't have a lot of stories about Queen Euphyllia in the first place…"

"From what I've heard, it sounds like she didn't have a lot of friends back then," I pointed out.

"That's right. Everyone knew Queen Euphyllia was Duke Magenta's daughter, and she was betrothed to the future king. Given her position, plenty of people wanted to approach her, but she had a habit of treating everyone equally. I don't think she had any particularly close friends."

"I heard she strived to be the perfect lady and the perfect queen consort," I added. "Because of that, people thought she lacked a certain human warmth. I remember you saying something similar, Navre."

"Ugh. Another memory I'd sooner not revisit… You know I sometimes have nightmares of my door getting kicked in…?" he groaned, holding his head in his hands.

If only I knew what he was talking about.

“Your door getting kicked in? Who did that?” Charnée asked.

“Ha-ha, that’s not important,” I interjected. “Anyway, we were talking about Euphie?”

Yes, who indeed? Someone who hoped to interrogate him locked away in his bedroom? They sounded despicable. Well, best not to ask too many questions.

“She lacked a human touch…?” Charnée repeated. “Queen Euphyllia always comes across as so kind. I just can’t imagine her being standoffish.”

“I always got the impression she was head over heels for Lady Anis…,” Garkie observed.

“Hey, wait a minute. I don’t mind what Charnée said, but what Garkie said is something else!” I interjected.

Seriously, how could he say that all of a sudden?!

Garkie shrank back with a grimace. “Huh…? S-sorry…”

“I wouldn’t be surprised to hear she was different at school compared to how she was in private… Especially when it comes to Commander Anisphia.”

“You too, Navre?!”

“In other words, what you’re all saying is her love for Princess Anisphia changed her,” Priscilla quipped.

“Sh-shut up! Don’t say it like that! You’re doing this out of spite, aren’t you?!”

“But it’s true, is it not?”

“Y-you’re distorting the facts!”

“Then why don’t we try a show of hands to see how many of us agree?”

“Stop it! You’re embarrassing me!”

“But there’s no doubt you occupy a special place in her heart, is there? She may open up to those close to her, but her demeanor *is* rather consistent with everyone else,” Priscilla continued, not letting up.

“Ugh… I’m not denying that. But still…!”

None of the others denied it, either… It seemed people still felt the same way about her, then…

It was certainly like her to keep others at a distance, but it wouldn't do for everyone to see her in that way.

In a sense, she was a lot like her father, Duke Grantz. Put favorably, he treated everyone equally—but put another way, he was indifferent to others. It wasn't like I was the only one Euphie had ever opened her heart to, but the overall number was certainly small.

I *was* worried about her limited number of friendships, but it wasn't like I was in a position to say anything to her…

Priscilla continued, "You're saying Queen Euphyllia's education was responsible for her being seen that way, though her personality played an important part, too. Yes?"

"She certainly isn't particularly outgoing, I suppose…," I admitted.

"Is it nice not having to worry about any change of heart when you're already viewed favorably?"

"…Priscilla," I muttered.

I could have fallen to the ground sapped of energy, but instead I caught my breath and massaged my forehead. Why did she have to take every opportunity to tease me?

She couldn't be doing this at Ilia's instruction…could she?

"If she had a wider circle of friends, she'd have more people to rely on, right?" I continued. "What worries me is how she's always trying to do everything herself."

"Yep, that's for sure," Garkie answered.

"I feel better knowing Lainie, Tilty, and Halphys are looking out for her, but even so…"

"It's hard to maintain proper friendships when the stakes are always so high…"

“Yep…”

From Priscilla’s perspective, Euphie could be her ticket to working her way up in the world so long as Euphie got to know her. Though I wasn’t personally fond of the idea, I could understand why she dreamed about being recognized by her.

It all went to show just how important Euphie was—and when I considered how that weight was depriving her of her freedom, I felt awful.

She might say she had taken on her burden of her own accord, but that was precisely why I wanted to do something to help her out.

“Ugh. Once you start worrying, there’s no end to it… I hope she’s doing all right…,” I murmured.

“I—I’m sure she’s okay!” Charnée called out to comfort and encourage me.

Ah, her innocence was a soothing balm.

All I wanted was to see Euphie again. I would be able to meet her soon with the weekend coming up, but even so…

“Oh…?”

All of a sudden, Priscilla turned her gaze outside the window, as if she had just noticed something.

“Hmm? Priscilla?”

She walked across the room and slid open the window to reveal a bird, which landed beside her.

“A carrier pigeon?” I said out loud.

“It looks like it’s from the royal palace.”

“Huh? The royal palace?”

Had something happened?

Before I knew it, I stood up from my seat, briskly positioning myself beside Priscilla.

In the meantime, she took the message from the pigeon and read it over.

Once she was done, she handed it to me.

"It seems it's from Lady Lainie, Your Highness," she declared.

"From Lainie?" I wasn't expecting to hear that name.

Without wasting a moment, I took the letter and read it. The content was concerning.

The others must have sensed the ominous atmosphere that had fallen over me, as they all turned suddenly tense.

"What is it, Commander Anisphia?" Navre asked.

"…Go find Lieutenant Commander Dragus, Navre. Sorry about this, but I have to rush back to the capital."

"Is something wrong?"

"It doesn't say. She probably can't give any details in a letter. All it says is I'm wanted back in the capital if at all possible."

"Judging from the tone, *something* must have happened, though it doesn't seem to be an emergency. What on earth could it be…?"

"We'd better go find out! Everyone, get ready as quickly as you can!" I instructed.

With that, the others scurried off, and I turned back to the letter once more.

Lainie had never sent any messages by carrier pigeon before, a fact that only added to my building anxiety.

"I hope it isn't anything too bad…"

* * *

After letting Dragus know we were heading back to the capital, we set off on our way.

No sooner had our Airbikes landed on the palace grounds than the squad of guards on duty rushed toward us.

"Commander Anisphia?! What are you doing here?" one of them asked in surprise.

"I have an urgent errand. Do you know where Euphie and Lainie are?"

"Oh? Queen Euphyllia should be resting at the detached palace today…"

"Euphie? *She* took a day off?"

Impossible—Euphie *never* took time off, certainly not on a weekday.

As my worry grew, my voice dropped considerably lower than usual, prompting the knight to shrink back.

Uh-oh. I had to make sure everyone stayed calm… "Sorry. I've had a bad day, that's all."

"I—I see…"

"Thanks for letting me know. I'll head to the detached palace. Can you take the Airbikes?"

"Of course!"

With that taken care of, we made for the detached palace, Navre and the others following a step behind me.

"Something big must have happened for Euphie of all people to take a day

off…," I grumbled.

"I'm not sure it's wise to assume that without any other evidence. Though this *is* Queen Euphyllia we're talking about…," I heard Navre murmur.

"I got the impression she works even on her days off…," Garkie added.

Priscilla's stern voice sounded from behind them. "We have no time for idle chitchat. Let us be off, Your Highness."

"You're very calm, Priscilla…," Charnée observed.

"Indeed. I'm more composed than ever," Priscilla replied flatly.

That comment was enough to ease the tension. Lainie had asked us to come back *if we could*, which meant this wasn't an emergency. There was no need to panic. We just had to keep our cool.

I slowed my racing thoughts by the time we arrived at the detached palace, where a maid noticed us, seemed surprised, and then walked over.

"Princess Anisphia?! We weren't expecting you!"

"I'm back. Sorry for dropping in so suddenly. I heard Euphie's here. Do you know where I can find her?"

"Queen Euphyllia is in her private chambers."

"I see. Thanks. I'll head over there right away."

"Eh? Ah, um… Your Highness!"

Without waiting for the maid, I set off at once for Euphie's room. After arriving outside and knocking on the door, I heard her voice from the other side.

"Come in."

"I'm here, Euphie!"

"…Anis?" She gasped as I threw the doors open with all my strength.

I found her reading a book in her room. I breathed a sigh of relief to see her so relaxed—though I was more than a little surprised.

Thank goodness she wasn't sick.

But if she was fine, why did Lainie want me to return…?

Taken aback by my sudden appearance, Euphie set her book down and came toward me.

“Anis? What’s wrong? Today isn’t supposed to be one of your days off…”

“That’s my line. You don’t have any official duties today? Why are you so… laid-back?”

Euphie’s eyes glazed over for a moment at this question. She was quick to hide it, but I couldn’t miss the brief change. That response—it was her typical way of trying to hide something.

Yep, something was definitely wrong. And it seemed Euphie had no intention of being forthright about it.

“I had a little free time today, that’s all, so I thought I’d take a breather…,” she said, brushing my question aside.

“…Euphie?” I said.

She said nothing.

“Euphie?” I asked again.

At last, she seemed to realize she couldn’t expect to pull one over on me.

She averted her gaze, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“Why won’t you look at me? Euphie?”

“No particular reason…”

“Then you should be able to look me in the eyes, right?”

“Oh, look! There’s something outside the window. What do you think it might be, Anis?”

“Euphie…”

“…”

“Something’s wrong. I can tell.”

“No. Er… Well…” Again, she tried to clumsily steer the conversation in a different direction. I continued to stare at her worriedly.

All at once, the door slammed open.

“Lady Anis! You’re back!”

“Lainie!”

In she came, followed by Navre and the others.

The moment Euphie laid eyes on her, bitter realization fell over her face. “… Lainie, you’re behind this?”

“Of course I had to report it. You didn’t think you could keep it from her, did you? She wouldn’t be happy either way, so best to get it over with,” Lainie scolded her.

Euphie fell silent, shrinking back slightly.

Euphie was certainly acting strangely, but Lainie’s behavior seemed off, too. Like she was on edge, almost angry. At Euphie…? But there seemed to be more to it, whatever it was.

I turned to Lainie for answers.

“Lainie, what’s going on? Did something happen with Euphie’s official duties today?”

“Their Former Majesties King Orphans and Queen Sylphine are handling Lady Euphyllia’s official duties, so you needn’t worry about that. As for the current situation—Lady Euphyllia is recuperating.”

“Recuperating?!” I blurted out.

“As I’ve told you again and again, Lainie, there’s nothing wrong with my physical condition,” Euphie called out timidly in an effort to reassure everyone, though she did seem somewhat flustered.

“You certainly don’t look unwell…,” Navre chimed in.

“As right as rain, as far as I can see,” Garkie added.

“I don’t see anything amiss, either,” Charnée whispered.

Only Priscilla remained silent, staring intently at Euphie.

The person in question, meanwhile, breathed a deep, exasperated sigh at

Lainie's explanation, then flashed her a sharp glare.

"Lady Euphyllia's *physical* condition is indeed in good form," Lainie said, "but there's more to it."

"What do you mean?"

"…Lady Euphyllia hasn't slept for several days."

"What?!" I gawked, my voice dropping low.

Silence fell over the room, as if we were in a vacuum. My thoughts, on the other hand, gained a newfound clarity, and my surroundings felt much more vivid. I could practically hold the whole space in my hands.

That was how I couldn't fail to notice everyone's attention focused my way, though that was understandable.

Because right now, I was truly, genuinely angry.

"…Euphie?"

"…I'm fine, really."

"You aren't sleeping. Would you try explaining to me how that's supposed to be fine?"

I had tried to keep my voice as gentle as possible, but all the same, Euphie shrank back. It wasn't like I wanted to scare her, but I needed to get some kind of explanation out of her.

I maintained my silence while I fought to calm my nerves. For her part, Euphie said nothing.

Unable to bear the hush that had fallen over the room, Navre spoke up. "Hold on, Lainie. You're saying Her Majesty hasn't slept in days?"

"That's exactly right, Master Navre."

"She looks healthy, though… What's going on?"

"That's because Lady Euphyllia is a spirit covenantor."

"What does that have to do with her not sleeping?"

"Simply put, she doesn't have the mental composure to conduct herself as a

human right now," Lainie declared, ice-cold.

That left Navre and the others speechless.

"Wh-what on earth…?"

"Spirit covenantors don't need to eat or sleep unless they consciously acknowledge such needs," Lainie explained. "As such, when they don't have enough energy, they may not behave like regular human beings. She hasn't slept a wink in days, and she's lost all appetite. She's tried forcing herself to eat to keep me and her other attendants at bay, but she's consumed little more than crumbs."

"Wh-what…? So that's what it means to be a spirit covenantor…?" Navre stammered, pressing a hand against his head in shock.

It was public knowledge that Euphie was a spirit covenantor, but even her closest associates would have trouble understanding the negative effects of that process, let alone the public at large. It would be all but impossible for anyone to understand what she had become.

In truth, not even I could fully understand her feelings—a fact that I found incredibly frustrating.

"…What do you mean?" I asked. Then I turned to Euphie. "What happened?"

She said nothing.

"Euphie."

"…I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"Yes, there have been a few troubling matters lately that have contributed to Lady Euphyllia's stress," Lainie clarified. "I've been in discussion with Lady Tilty, and she agrees—we thought it best you return as soon as possible, Lady Anis."

"I see. I'll have to thank her later." I let out a long sigh, picturing the face of my ever-dependable friend.

Now then—how to get my stubborn Euphie to spill the beans?

I stared into her eyes, but ever so subtly, she averted her gaze.

"So? You're not going to say anything?" I demanded.

"…I'm sorry."

"I'm not looking for an apology… You're really okay?"

"…No," she admitted at last, the cracks emerging in her hard shell. "I'm sorry, everyone," she said, addressing the others. "Do you mind giving me and Anis some privacy?"

"Very well," Lainie said. She ushered the others outside as she left the room.

Soon, only Euphie and I remained. As soon as we were alone, Euphie reached out to timidly take my hand, as if probing an injury.

Returning her grip, I wrapped my other arm around her body to hold her close.

"…I'm sorry, Anis," she said, leaning in and resting her head on my shoulder.

"It's okay. But really, what happened? Let me spoil you a little, then you can tell me, all right?"

"I did something unworthy of myself, that's all…"

"Unworthy? You're doing your best, Euphie. What went wrong?"

"It isn't a huge issue… Well, it does weigh on me personally, I suppose."

"What happened?" I asked again.

Euphie trembled again for a short moment, then slowly began to speak: "…I had a little trouble managing my emotions. I failed."

"You failed…?"

"…I nearly killed someone."

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't conceal my surprise at this. She had nearly *killed* someone?

The only time I had ever seen her want to murder someone was during the fight with Lilana. She wasn't the kind of person who harbored violent thoughts toward others.

I just couldn't believe that my Euphie, who I knew so well, could want to harm someone so severely, to the point she regretted her own actions.

“What really happened? It doesn’t make any sense, you losing control and almost killing someone.”

“Thank you for saying that, but it’s true…,” she whispered, her voice filled with despair.

I felt like grinding my teeth in frustration. I had never seen her so weakened before.

“Knowing you, you must have been really upset…,” I began. “What in the world did they do to make you feel that way? Did they say something that got under your skin?”

“…Please don’t get mad. Okay?”

“Ah. So it’s about me…?”

“…You guessed it.”

“Hmm. Yeah. Well, it’s starting to make sense now.”

We let go, glancing into each other’s faces as we exchanged light smiles.

It was a slightly embarrassing situation, but it looked like Euphie was finally beginning to relax a little.

I felt a little awkward hearing how much she treasured me, but right now her mental state took precedence.

“So? What did they say about me?”

“I was in the middle of a meeting when they approached me directly.”

“A direct appeal…? That sounds pretty serious.”

I still didn’t know exactly what happened or why, but even someone as politically obtuse as I was could appreciate how unusual it was for someone to make a direct entreaty to the queen.

On top of that, if it was during a meeting, there would be other nobles in attendance, and if they asked for something outlandish, it would be sure to cause a stir. Just what was this person thinking?

“What kind of noble was it?” I asked.

"A young man," Euphie answered. "He raised questions about your achievements."

"He did? What about? Magicology or magical tools? Or was it about the new city?"

"No, none of those…" Once again, her voice trailed off into an awkward silence.

This discussion must have brought the memories flooding back, as she had to pause for a moment to catch her breath, fighting to suppress an upswell of emotion.

"If not those, then what?" I asked, my head cocked to one side in bewilderment.

Euphie stared at me with shock.

Huh? Why…?

"Really? Nothing comes to mind…?" she asked. "It was about the dragon you killed."

"Huh?! *That?!* That's kind of out of the blue, but I guess you could call it an achievement…"

It was easy to forget, seeing as I was mostly interested in getting my hands on the magicite crystal, but in the eyes of the public, our slaying of the dragon was spun into a heroic tale intended to overshadow the rumors of Euphie's broken engagement.

The slaying should have been credited to Euphie and me together rather than just me myself…but apparently someone was calling that into question. This news was so unbelievable that I was at a total loss.

It had been years since we defeated the dragon. Why would anyone waste their time bringing it up now?

"How did that topic come up in the first place?" I asked.

"…The man said I was wholly responsible for it. Or something like that."

"Huh? Seriously?"

"…Yes."

I breathed a low groan. How on earth had he arrived at that conclusion?

"Wait, so he said it wasn't me who defeated it? That you were behind the whole thing?"

"Exactly. He suspected I was trying to elevate your status by crediting you for slaying it."

I let out a disgusted sigh. Sure, I understood the intention behind the man's claim, but surely there must have been a better way of going about it.

At the time, I was considered nothing more than a weirdo researching and developing bizarre tools. I could understand why people might doubt the tales that I had slain the dragon.

After all, it was unthinkable that someone who couldn't even wield magic had been able to eliminate a creature that had posed such an immense danger.

But even so, the nobleman's claim was groundless. There were plenty of witnesses other than Euphie who had seen what happened, and the royal family itself had publicly acknowledged my actions. So how did he arrive at his conclusion?

I mean, he could say whatever he wanted, though there was always the risk he could be charged with lèse-majesté. What benefit was there in bringing it up now?

"…When he voiced his doubts about you, it was like my vision went red. I nearly lost myself."

"…Euphie."

"…I thought, why am I trying to defend a country that keeps on spurning you?"

Her voice was quiet and filled with resignation.

Ah, so that was what was bothering her.

CHAPTER 1
Dissonant Passions

A few days prior to Anis's return to the royal capital…

"It's time, Lady Euphyllia."

"Already? Thank you, Lainie," I answered, glancing up from my desk in my office at the royal palace.

My plan had been to continue with my duties up until the meeting with my advisors, but I may perhaps have been focusing too much on my work. If Lainie hadn't come to remind me, I very well might have missed it.

Perhaps she suspected the same thing, as she breathed a long, exasperated sigh.

"It's all well and good to throw yourself into your work, but do remember to take breaks every once in a while," she cautioned me.

"Yes, I understand."

"I hope so…," she said, peering hard into my face and prompting me to look away in an effort to escape.

She had warned me many times about my habit of getting too absorbed in my tasks and losing track of time, but I still tended to get carried away…

"Lady Ilia warned me! You *are* just like Lady Anis in that regard!"

"I'll be more careful from now on…"

"Lady Anis seems to think such responses are sufficient, too…"

"Come on, Lainie. We're short on time, so we had better hurry."

I could see this conversation wasn't going my way, so I set about cleaning up my desk.

For a moment, Lainie continued to stare at me as if she had more to say, but

it wasn't long before she breathed a resigned sigh.

As if on cue, a knock sounded at the door once I was finished clearing my desk.

Lainie went to open it, revealing Lang, Marion, and Miguel.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty," Lang said.

"Thank you for coming, everyone. Please, take a seat," I answered, urging my three visitors to the sofas.

Once they were all seated, I sat across from them and gave them my full attention. These three were some of my most reliable advisors, and I regularly sought their thoughts on matters of state.

"Let's get started right away. First, how are things at the Ministry of the Arcane, Lang?" I asked.

"We're carrying out our affairs in an orderly manner. Efficiency has improved, thanks to the introduction of Princess Anisphia's Thought Boards, and we've finished reorganizing our materials and improving our management system. In fact, we now have surplus manpower. I'll submit a full report later, but we're considering expanding our operations."

"What specifically do you suggest?"

"At Princess Anisphia's suggestion, the Ministry of the Arcane has been educating non-aristocratic magic users to send to the new magicology city. We would like to further develop this program to continue recruiting talent into the future. To that end, we would like to select and train suitable personnel."

"I see. That does sound like a good idea. Construction at the magicology city is proceeding faster than expected. We could use the lessons everyone has learned to further develop untapped territories. I look forward to reading your full report."

"Yes. I'm also of the opinion it would behoove us to make part of the ministry an independent body."

"Oh? Which part?"

"There has been a growing interest in magicology and magical tools within the

ministry. We expect the number of students wishing to conduct further research in these areas to continue to increase. With the establishment of the Magicology Laboratory, I believe it would be beneficial to set up a body to address future developments. Specifically, an independent organization centered on highly motivated individuals hailing from the ministry."

I felt my lips curling in a smile at Lang's suggestion.

Yes, I was glad to hear that the Ministry of the Arcane, with its complicated history with Anis, was beginning to change.

Our efforts were finally taking shape.

"That's a great suggestion," I replied. "I had been thinking about something similar myself, but I'm glad to hear the ministry is considering it without any intervention."

"Yes. One of our members has recently married the second-most knowledgeable authority on magicology, after Princess Anisphia herself. He should be more than suitable, I would think."

Marion broke into a deep scowl. "Are you mocking me, Lang...?" he asked, his face turning red with anger.

"Whatever do you mean, Marion?" Lang chuckled in response.

As a friend of Halphys, I found her husband's reaction strangely amusing.

I did, however, feel somewhat guilty toward her. Given Halphys's proximity to me and Anis, she had been targeted by individuals hoping to meddle in the kingdom's political affairs. Her hasty marriage to Marion had been necessary to ensure the two weren't separated.

I felt responsible for their rushed marriage, so I prayed they would find true happiness together.

"I'm glad to hear things are well at the ministry. Shall we move on to our next topic, then?" I suggested.

"All right," Miguel began. "Then I'll go ahead and report on Princess Anisphia's magicology city." He always acted so frivolous, which made him difficult to read. And it made Lang's forehead wrinkle deepen in consternation.

With a soft grin at this familiar exchange, I adjusted my position to face him.

"What kind of rumors have you caught wind of, Miguel?" I asked.

"First, there's a growing appreciation for magical tools among the common people, who are using them to improve their everyday lives. And some of the more astute merchant guilds are trying to leverage their aristocratic connections to gain a foothold in the magicology city."

"I've been approached by a number of nobles myself," I answered. "I don't want them to try negotiating directly with Anis. Keep an eye on them if you would."

"Sure thing. That's my job after all."

Miguel's family, the Graphites, oversaw much of the kingdom's shadowy business. Few knew their true nature.

His information was highly valuable, not the sort of thing I could afford to ignore. It came as a huge relief to have him as an ally.

"Next up, the nobility. I've got good news and bad. Those based in the east are usually pretty loyal to the crown, so they're happy."

"That *is* good news."

"The crown's support to secure spirit stone deposits has been well received, and Princess Anisphia still has a good reputation there from her adventurer days. And the fact that Queen Emeritus Sylphine is from the east might play a part in that as well."

"I see. When the sun rises over one corner of the world, it sets in another… The bad news, then?"

"The nobles from the west."

Broadly speaking, aristocratic power in the Kingdom of Palettia could be divided into three groups.

First came the central area. The northern and southern regions were relatively small in terms of power and influence, so they were included within its borders.

Second, the eastern regions. This faction had long been instrumental in settling and expanding the kingdom's territory, but it was also complicit in the coup attempt before Anis's father became king. The kingdom instituted reforms after putting an end to the coup, and this all led to a generational change. As a result, most members of the ruling class in the eastern regions were relatively young. That did mean, however, that they faced a lot of difficulties.

All the same, given my policies to develop the area to extract spirit resources, they were wholehearted in their support for my rule. Besides, I already had a strong connection with them through my father, and they were worthwhile allies for me and Anis.

Third came the western regions, comparable in size to the central ones and no less powerful. Not even the royal family could afford to ignore them.

The western nobles had protected the kingdom's borders for generations and played a vital role in the nation's defense. They were a proud group. And yet…

"Corruption was rampant among the nobility before you took the throne, Your Majesty, and it's safe to say much of it originated in the west."

"Fueled by illicit contraband from beyond our borders…?" I asked.

Miguel gave me a firm nod.

At this, Lang's and Marion's expressions turned grim.

"While it's debatable whether luxury goods should be deemed illegal, the real issue lies in the Kingdom of Palettia's ban on the ownership of slaves and exotic creatures," Miguel answered.

"Disgusting… That sort of behavior is an outrage. It's unworthy of our nobility," Lang spat.

A policy with deep roots in the realm's history, slavery was forbidden in the Kingdom of Palettia.

The first king, the founder, had originally belonged to a nomadic people fleeing persecution in western lands. As such, the kingdom's raison d'être was for his oppressed people to secure their own place in the world. For that reason, the kingdom refused to permit slavery of any kind, and those who

trafficked in their fellow human beings were severely punished.

In the case of exotic animals, there was a distinct possibility that if they managed to escape from their owners and return to the wild, they could end up becoming monsters. That could have a grave impact on the overall ecosystem and even risked diplomatic trouble if instinct prompted them to return to their original homeland.

As such, there were stringent restrictions on the importation of exotic creatures from abroad. According to Miguel, however, it seemed such animals had become a popular luxury among the kingdom's western nobles.

"Being from the west myself, these findings leave me feeling rather conflicted…," Marion muttered with a hint of bitterness.

"The Antti family may hail from the west, but you've essentially joined the central forces since entering the Ministry of the Arcane, no?" Lang opined encouragingly. "Our western regions may be crucial for protecting our borders, but at the same time, they serve as a gateway to foreign lands. It's quite unavoidable. There are boundless opportunities to brush up against foreign cultures, and it isn't hard to see how one might be tempted and negatively swayed. The ability to exercise adequate self-restraint ought to be a prerequisite for any noble…"

"Lang's right," Miguel responded. "Plenty of nobles think they won't get caught for any borderline illegal activities. I mean, we'd be in over our heads if we tried to hold them accountable for every little thing they do wrong."

"…Just how much leverage does your father, Marquis Graphite, have over them?" I asked.

"That's a secret. It'll only come out if our house is utterly destroyed." Miguel flashed me a grin—a vaguely intimidating one.

As the heir to the House of Graphite, responsible for the kingdom's most clandestine operations, he understood the weight of his role well.

Since I was a person who bore a great deal of responsibility myself, perhaps that was why I liked him. Personality-wise, however, we were at complete odds.

"In any case, the western regions have been kept at a distance since His

Former Majesty's reign. It makes sense we don't have a firm grasp on the situation there," Miguel noted.

"I'm told support from the west was kept to a minimum even during the civil war on the grounds of national defense," I remarked.

"I'm just going to say it—they're opportunists. They'll prioritize their own interests before anything else. Not a dumb way to go about it, if you ask me."

"They make up a sizable force, and we can't simply ignore them. I've been working to gather support in the central and eastern regions over the past couple of years, but I feel like our western nobles still doubt me."

"That's because you could decide their fates with a single word, Your Majesty," Lang pointed out. "They're naturally cautious."

"...The title of spirit covenantor is heavier than I thought..."

After all, the first king had performed the great feat of a spirit covenant, the ultimate form of magic—yet I had gone down this path simply for Anis's sake. In my case, I didn't see it as some extraordinary accomplishment.

On top of that, I had encountered foes capable of withstanding my powers, which was why I knew the kingdom would have to change trajectories.

The best course of action was to develop Anis's magicology and keep producing new magical tools.

"I don't know if it's a good thing or not, but Princess Anisphia doesn't have such a negative reputation in the west. She doesn't have a favorable reputation, either, mind you—just a measured one. The west thrives on commerce, and its merchants are eager to start distributing her magical tools."

"We'll have to maintain tight control over their export to foreign lands, won't we?" I inquired.

"Indeed. The misuse of spirit stones powering them, or of the magical tools themselves, could anger our neighbors unnecessarily."

Spirit stones were used to aid in daily life in the Kingdom of Palettia, but it was said they had been adapted as weapons in other lands. For that reason, we would have to be extremely cautious in introducing magical tools.

"It may be a little early, but it would be a good idea to start preparing our distribution system now. I have some leads with a promising trading company, so I'll start feeling them out."

"Thank you, Miguel."

"No biggie! I'm happy to help you complete your mission!"

"…Ahem. Putting the western regions aside, as it stands, we only have several minor hiccups to address," Lang interrupted, glossing over Miguel's overly casual tone of voice. "It's no exaggeration to say that the kingdom has been remarkably stable since your accession to the throne, Your Majesty."

I nodded. "I would be in quite a bind if it wasn't," I replied smoothly. "That was the whole point of the spirit covenant."

"…Right. It does mean you're drawing a whole lot of attention, though," Miguel murmured.

"Ah… Yes, I suppose I am."

I breathed a tired sigh.

Yes, spirit covenantors weren't only feared—they were also the object of immense public interest and symbols of the spiritualist faith. Frankly, I found it all rather troublesome…

"Is there still a high level of interest in my spirit covenant?" I asked.

"Naturally," Miguel answered. "I'm not particularly devout, but even I feel a sense of reverence toward you."

"You're a symbol of the nation," Marion added. "Unsurprisingly, people are in awe."

Once again, I sighed. I could understand their reactions. They just went to show how deeply rooted my spirit covenant had become in the minds of the kingdom's nobility.

"They're interested, yes, but more worrisome is the possibility that some may be so dazzled by your achievements that they succumb to unwarranted ambition," Marion noted. "I suspect many have already forgotten the incident with Count Chartreuse…"

“That’s insane… Though I suppose it only seems that way to us because we’re in personal contact with Queen Euphyllia here…,” Miguel murmured.

“You can’t have dishonest individuals in positions of trust… On that point, I’m not even sure how reliable Duke Magenta is,” Lang noted.

I smiled thinly at the mention of my father.

Despite our being publicly estranged, my father continued to serve the kingdom as my devoted subject. We often expressed conflicting opinions, and I went to great lengths to make sure no one realized just how close we were.

I still had great respect and admiration for him—and I knew he felt the same way about me. Which was why I wanted our relationship to stay the way it was.

At that moment, Miguel came out with a question: “So, Your Majesty—are you and Duke Magenta really on bad terms?”

“Hey, Miguel!” Lang blurted out.

“It’s all right,” I said. “We haven’t fallen out, if that’s what you’re asking. We’ve simply drawn a line between us. He doesn’t go out of his way to publicly support me—he’s simply doing his duty to protect the kingdom. And I trust him to do that.”

“Hmm. Well, I guess that’s fine, then. You’re pretty similar, you know?” Miguel commented.

“Not at all,” I answered.

“You’re a bit quick to deny it, there…”

In what way was I just like my father? Miguel liked to come out with the most ridiculous comments sometimes. We weren’t at all alike. Not in the slightest.

As I had said to Anis on many an occasion, I found that comparison incredibly vexing.

Lang must have sensed my unease, as he quickly tried to change the subject. “It’s a long-standing attitude on the part of most western nobles, the reluctance to fully submit to the crown. That being said, they must realize it would be unwise to isolate themselves, given your wide-ranging support, Your Majesty. What on earth could they be up to…?”

"I'm not really sure, to be honest," Miguel answered. "Even internally, the western regions have a complicated political situation. The bloc is basically balanced by two opposing forces. You've got the hardliners responsible for national defense, and then you've got the underhanded, opportunistic ones with strong ties to commercial ventures."

"Neither group has taken the lead over the other, I take it?" I asked.

"They know each other's weaknesses, so they've basically counterbalanced each other. They're tightly bound together, but given their drastically different priorities, it takes them a good while to come to any sort of unified decision. They're not particularly spontaneous, that's for sure."

I had deduced as much from my own research. The fact that Miguel had all but confirmed my findings suggested my sources were well informed.

Miguel and I certainly weren't hostile, but at the same time, I hesitated to trust him completely.

With that thought, Anis's face suddenly came to mind.

There were very few people I could truly say who definitely had my back, who I could trust would never betray me. She was at the top of that list.

I missed her dearly. The longer we were apart, the more I felt her absence.

"Well, when it comes to the western regions, you've just got to be patient," Miguel said.

"Yes. I suppose those are the most pressing issues. We should be able to focus on the small details from here on," I answered.

"I'm guessing it'd probably take a decade or thereabouts to complete all your reforms. New issues will probably pop up further down the track."

Yes, there was still a long way to go. I let out an exhausted breath. Though given my expected lifetime, perhaps it wouldn't be so long after all.

On the other hand, given my position, it weighed on my mind.

"...Speaking of which, Your Majesty," Lang said, "I'm hesitant to bring this matter up directly, but may I?"

"Go ahead."

"Am I correct in assuming you don't intend to marry…? Or rather, to produce an heir?"

Marion's eyes widened in shock at this question as he spun around in his chair.

Miguel, for his part, continued to wear his usual smile—though I didn't miss the sharp glint in his eyes.

I, on the other hand, accepted the question with peace and calm.

I suspected Lang had been wanting to ask that for some time now, though he had never brought it up before today.

In his own way, I sensed, he was conflicted over it.

"I intend to transform the way the country operates, Lang. I may have entered into a spirit covenant, but that doesn't mean I believe magic is the solution to all our problems."

"Not even with your skills and ability, Your Majesty?"

"No."

Magic was simply a form of power, a means to an end. I had always thought of it that way, but after Lilana had defeated me so soundly, I felt it all the more strongly.

It was partly because Lilana had such an advantage over me that I considered her the natural enemy of any spirit covenantor, but there were also her own innate talents to consider, and the tenacity inherited through generations of vampires.

I certainly didn't think I had skimped on my training, but I also had to accept the fact that I had lost to a vampire who had spent her entire life honing her abilities.

She taught me that no matter how great a power one might wield, it had to be handled with knowledge and wisdom. One could never afford to stop learning.

To be perfectly honest, Lilana still haunted my dreams from time to time. However, she also taught me a lesson I ought to always keep close. A truly bitter lesson…

"I know my way of thinking won't always hold true. If someone else wishes to continue with the old ways and truly believes it will contribute to the well-being of the people, I will step aside. Should that happen, there would be no place for me."

"I see…"

"No. If someone were to succeed me on the throne, it shouldn't be my own child. My blood isn't meant to remain in the royal family."

Lang fell silent at this response, his lips tightening as he sank deep into thought.

Miguel, on the other hand, wore a bright grin. "If that's what you want, Your Majesty, then I'll be on the lookout for any nobles lurking in the shadows. I know there's more than a few already chasing after you, and others trying to win Princess Anisphia's favor as well."

"…Yes, I suppose we should keep a handle on them. They're such a headache."

It was infuriating how those nobles always defied Anis, how they were constantly trying to oppress her, all so they could amass more power for themselves.

Personally, I would have loved to punish the lot of them. No, my anger when it came to such individuals wasn't easily calmed.

At the very least, they should have tried winning her affection sooner. Though I didn't much like the thought of Anis being saved by someone else.

"Whoa, you're scaring me, Your Majesty. Your aura is getting a little dangerous," Miguel pointed out.

"…My apologies. It seems I let my emotions get the better of me."

"Well, I guess it's a bit late to go over all this now, huh?"

"There was considerable difficulty deciding who to bring in as staff at the

detached palace, as I recall…"

"That was rough, no doubt about it. Still, it's probably a good thing we were able to weed out the bad apples as soon as we did." Miguel let out a hearty laugh, though his eyes weren't smiling.

I was certain there was more going on behind the scenes than I was fully aware of, but I would leave that matter alone for now. "It's too late for anyone trying to get close to Anis. Really."

"Well, they treated her pretty terribly, so it isn't surprising they're changing strategies."

"That hurts a little, you know…?"

"There's no use worrying about it now," Lang muttered with an unreadable look.

Miguel patted him on the shoulder, and Lang responded by flashing him an annoyed glare, though he said nothing more.

"You've butted horns with Anis yourself, Lang," I noted. "What concerns me now, though, are those who want to use her to their own ends. I understand people may have ulterior motives, but I find it distasteful. I wish they could at least hide it better…"

"Well, I just hope it doesn't end up adding to my workload," Miguel said with a light shrug.

"That, too," I responded with a wry chuckle. "It's beyond frustrating not being able to come up with an easy solution to these issues. I suppose that's why I don't want to bother Anis with them."

I wanted her to focus on chasing after the untapped possibilities of magic so she could pave the way for the future, which was why I had to do my best not to distract her.

"Our next moves will be clearer after your upcoming meeting with the nobles from the western regions," Lang said. "Hopefully, we can make some progress there."

"Yes, I hope so."

Indeed. Until that day, that was all I had wanted.

Never in my wildest dreams did I suspect that meeting would end up creating more problems…

* * *

My meeting with the nobles from the western regions was for discussing the development of new highways and trading routes in anticipation of further projects.

The most powerful western nobles tended to keep close to home, so it was necessary to arrange these meetings every now and then. There were various reasons they holed themselves up in their own territories, but primarily it was the need to constantly monitor the border.

It had taken a good amount of time to schedule this meeting in the royal capital, but it was finally about to get underway…

"I understand Your Majesty's request. We western nobles have no objection. We would like to proceed with this discussion with the intention of accepting your proposal," said an elderly gentleman with a mane of pure white hair.

His name was Marquis Sienna, and at over sixty years old, he was perhaps the most respected and preeminent aristocrat in the west.

That being said, he exuded a calm aura like a large, majestic tree; he was old, but he did not seem weak. There was a clear gulf of experience between us, and I had difficulty gauging his thoughts.

He was like my father in some ways—namely, that I was reluctant to deal with him. In fact, I found him even more inscrutable than what I was used to.

The other western nobles all but lined up behind him, so it was clear who was driving the conversation—a fact that made it only more difficult for me to properly express myself.

"Can I take it you agree with our highway development plan?" I asked.

"Indeed. It will be wonderful to see the kingdom thriving. Even in the distant west, we've heard rumors of Princess Anisphia's magicology. Many of us are eagerly anticipating its fruits."

"Then I'd like to discuss the plan with you in more detail, if you don't mind…"

"I understand you're anxious to move ahead, Your Majesty, but I'd like to bring your proposal back to my colleagues in the west for the time being," Marquis Sienna said in a matter-of-fact voice that expertly concealed his true feelings.

I stared back at him, doing my best not to break into a frown. "What do you mean?"

"The demand for spirit stones, which are the driving force behind magicology and magical tools, will increase in the future. We understand Your Majesty wishes to establish a suitable trade network for distribution. However, a thorough survey will be required before we can proceed. We believe it would be wise for someone familiar with the west to compile the first draft."

"I was hoping to discuss a working proposal at this meeting," I pointed out.

"With all due respect, the west is a unique region, very different from the central and eastern provinces. Uninformed planning without an adequate understanding of its unique background would simply be a waste of effort. We wouldn't want to trouble you unnecessarily, Your Majesty."

"…So you're saying you want to go back to your holdings, put together your own plan, then present it to me at a later date?"

"It would be more efficient to make revisions after reviewing our own proposal. I say this out of consideration for your busy schedule, Your Majesty."

"In that case, Marquis Sienna, shouldn't you have prepared a draft proposal before coming to this meeting? I believe you had already been informed of Her Majesty's plans," Lang cut in sharply. As a representative of the Ministry of the Arcane, he was thoroughly displeased.

Marquis Sienna, however, didn't so much as flinch.

"Hmph! You realize we can't just cater to every whim of the central provinces!" complained a plump middle-aged noble. His outfit was so gaudy I assumed he wore it primarily to flaunt his wealth.

This was Count Ebony. Like Marquis Sienna, he was one of the most powerful

nobles in the west. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that Marquis Sienna stood at the forefront of the western nobles defending the kingdom's border, while Count Ebony oversaw those heavily involved in trade and commerce.

Marquis Sienna was so quiet it was almost suspicious, but Count Ebony's flaccid cheeks broke into a grin. It was an uncanny look, and his hoarse voice, sounding like his throat had been scorched by fire, only added to that impression.

"Marquis Sienna is right! The west is a crucial bulwark in the nation's defense! And don't forget trade! These decisions can't be made lightly! I hope you understand our determination to support you, Your Majesty, even if we have to push back a little!"

"I understand your point, but that doesn't change the fact that your position is still unclear."

"Are you questioning our loyalty?!"

"Who said anything about loyalty?" Lang challenged. "What we're concerned about is the lack of transparency regarding the crown's financial support in the west. We're told the irregularities are indeed suspicious, yet it seems to take forever for you to properly scrutinize them. If you ask me, moving slowly seems to be a trademark of the western regions."

"*We* call it prudence and caution! This is why we can't stand the tyranny of the central provinces! I'd say you don't have any intention of rewarding our efforts! Am I wrong?!" Count Ebony shouted in response.

"We're all simply trying to fulfill our duties," Lang said, his expression unchanging.

"Hmph! How far are we supposed to trust you?! Count Chartreuse's rebellion is still fresh in everyone's minds! I'm forced to wonder how much you lot are supposed to have redeemed yourselves! Maybe it's because you're still wet behind the ears that you haven't made much progress?!"

"...Are you insulting the Ministry of the Arcane?"

"You think that's an insult? It's a plain old fact, isn't it?"

Lang's expression clouded over. I could feel his frustration, could sense that he was about to respond, unable to let that indignity stand.

Fortunately, other western nobles spoke up before I was forced to intervene. Indeed, I was so taken aback that I lost my opportunity to speak up.

"Count Ebony! You've gone too far! Can't you see *your* overweening attitude is what's tarnishing our reputation!"

"Didn't I say I was just stating the facts? It's the central nobles and their Ministry of the Arcane that are always looking down on us!"

"But the problem is the lack of transparency with your revenues! I must ask you not to paint all the western provinces with the same brush!"

"Don't play dumb! You're no beacon of purity and innocence! You—you've been going on nonstop about national defense, but you've been gobbling up funds without any proper planning! I'm sick and tired of your empty talk!"

"You're the one blinded by money! You never shut up about it! It's clear your head doesn't have room for anything else!"

"How dare you?! In that case, aren't you all a bunch of traitors, recklessly wasting money under the guise of national defense?! You should be ashamed! You ought to bow down before Her Majesty and beg forgiveness!"

"Damn you, Ebony!"

All of a sudden, the western nobles began throwing around all manner of vulgar barbs. I was taken aback. Lang, previously fuming with anger, looked on in bewilderment. Could this mean the western nobles were less cohesive than we had thought?

Marquis Sienna was the one who broke through both their bickering and our confusion. "Quiet! You're in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen."

"M-Marquis Sienna…"

"…I apologize for that unworthy display, Your Majesty. To you as well, Lord Lang," the marquis said, rising to his feet and offering a deep bow.

"…I accept your apology. Please, raise your head, Marquis Sienna," I answered, not sure how else to respond.

I could have pressed the group further, but something about the situation made me wary, so I held back.

While I pondered my next move, Marquis Sienna stood up straight and continued speaking. “As you can see, this meeting is unlikely to lead us to a firm resolution. May I suggest we postpone this for now so we can discuss the matter further among ourselves?”

“…Well…”

As far as I was concerned, ending the meeting at this point was far from desirable. Something told me if we didn’t finalize our plans here and now, we never would.

But how was I supposed to proceed? Would it be better to cut to the chase and accuse them of incompetence, or worse? Or should I approach it a different way? Just as I was pondering these questions, another figure spoke up, a young western noble.

“Hold on a moment, Marquis Sienna. Now that we’ve made fools of ourselves in front of Her Majesty, shouldn’t we inform her of the reality of our situation?”

“I thought I said we would hold off on that, Count Leghorn?”

“I’m afraid I cannot! It’s for the good of the kingdom! Please, Queen Euphyllia, hear me out!” the young Count Leghorn cried, failing to heed Marquis Sienna’s warning. He stared across at me, his eyes filled with an unusual degree of passion. “We western nobles have been striving day in, day out to shield this country from external threats! But being directly adjacent to the border, we have to deal with all sorts of unexpected circumstances! Because of that, we aren’t unified in ideology or objectives! There are even a fair few law-breaking tramps among us! Something must be done! I pray you’ll use your power and authority to unify us, Your Majesty!”

“Y-you scoundrel! What are you saying?!”

“The impudence, bringing this to Her Majesty!”

“Shut up! *You’re* supposed to be the twin pillars of the west?! Everyone can see you’re always at each other’s throats!”

“So you’re asking the crown to intervene?! Have you forgotten our long-held beliefs?!”

“You mean the notion the west needs to be independent to maintain the purity of the royal bloodline and to shield the nation?! And how many in our midst are exploiting those principles to line their own pockets?!”

“Damn it! Where’s your evidence? Show us! Without that, you’re committing slander!”

Like that, the western nobles were in an uproar again, now focused entirely on Count Leghorn. More than a few were glancing about left and right, unable to hide their confusion.

Really, the situation had become so chaotic, it was giving me a headache. How on earth had the meeting come to this…?

“Queen Euphyllia! Please, bring your great authority to the west!”

“Enough! Don’t listen to this man, Your Majesty! Someone, get him out of here!”

“Quiet, everyone.” I spoke in a much firmer tone than usual in an effort to bring the angry outbursts ringing in my ears under control.

Almost instantly, the din quieted down to nothing, and I could finally catch my breath. I had to find some way to get our meeting back on track…

“I’ve heard your request, Count Leghorn. However, I cannot punish anyone without proper evidence. Let’s conduct an investigation first before passing judgment.”

“Y-Your Majesty! Do you really trust this man’s words?!”

“No, but where there’s smoke, there’s fire. It will all be brought to the light of day…”

“This is all a scheme to drive a wedge between Your Majesty and the west!” protested Count Ebony. “Don’t err in judgment, Your Majesty!”

“I don’t consider anyone guilty at present. Not until I see the results of a thorough investigation.”

The nobles continued to complain, but Count Leghorn, not to be outdone, roared, “Queen Euphyllia! If you give them time, some might try to cover up their tracks! I suggest you detain us western nobles until you’ve learned the truth—myself included!”

“Y-you fool! Shut that blighted mouth of yours!”

“You’re the one who should shut up! Why do you always have to go against Her Majesty’s wishes?! She’s a spirit covenantor! The reincarnation of our founding king! Where’s your faith if you refuse to obey her?!” Count Leghorn shouted.

At this, the nobles fell silent.

Their expressions varied. Some pouted sullenly, others looked on as if trying to gauge my mood, while others had turned pale, their faces downcast.

Examining them all, I felt disheartened. In some respects, those with strong religious beliefs, like Count Leghorn, would be the most difficult to bring around in the long run.

It was because of their piety and faith that they were willing to go so far with their remarks. If I wasn’t careful with my words when pointing out their mistakes, I could end up causing even more trouble.

My headache was swiftly evolving into a migraine, but just before I could open my mouth to speak up, Count Leghorn beat me to the punch: “Queen Euphyllia! It’s your mission to bring peace to the land! We’ve heard stories about your mercy! But your compassion should be reserved for your truly faithful subjects! Please, we await your decision!”

“Count Leghorn,” I answered slowly. “It’s true that I’ve completed a spirit covenant and that, as such, I was able to take the throne. However, I am not the law itself. Criminal punishment must be decided according to our laws, not according to my whims.”

“A lenient hand won’t bring a stop to their wrongdoing!”

…What in the world was he trying to accomplish with all this? I was missing something. I leaned back in my chair to consider my next words.

"…Are you saying the queen's will takes precedence over the laws of the land?" I asked at last, my tone flat. "If we set that precedent, future kings or queens could use it to punish their subjects unjustly. Are you saying the west has fallen into such depravity that we should take that level of risk?"

My words were as cold as ice, but deep inside, I was positively fuming.

"What do you say, Count Leghorn?" I pressed again.

"…Yes! What the west needs is Your Majesty's divine authority! We need you to save the righteous among us! We aren't all wicked, so I humbly beg you to show mercy on your righteous subjects!"

"…Yet you won't try to fix the issues yourselves?"

"No one listens to me! They're corrupt, and they've poisoned the system to protect themselves! No matter how righteous we are, our institutions and rules are rotting from the inside, leading only to oppression! There's no happiness to be found for those of us who remain true and loyal! We need action, swift and decisive! Please, I beg you to intervene…!"

…Ah. I could feel the anger in the pit of my stomach growing out of control.

He had conveyed his passion, his fervent wish for me to do what he saw as the right thing. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that he was a *good person*, with a spirit of making sacrifices and of serving others.

But that was just it. His plea left me unmoved. I breathed a deep sigh.

"I understand your request, Count Leghorn. But I must order you to leave the room."

"Queen Euphyllia…?! Why?!"

"This meeting is to discuss the future of the royal family's involvement in the western regions. It isn't a venue for individual petitions, especially not from western nobles. Take a moment to step back, cool your head, and reflect on your actions."

"Why won't you understand?! Our current laws are imperfect! They can't correct injustice! That's why we need you to step in!"

"If we were to change something, it mustn't be solely at my own discretion."

"You're mistaken! You can shape the realm however you want! Why are you so eager to let others take the credit for your achievements?! If you wield your true power for all to see, everyone will bow before you! There's no need to keep making a display of Princess Anisphia, for instance!"

"…What is *that* supposed to mean?" I asked in a low voice, unable to trust what I had just heard.

Then, acting as if he had my approval to keep going, Count Leghorn continued, "Yes, her idea of magicology should be promulgated through the realm! But granting her the title of knight commander—well, it's excessive! Nobles should be the ones to stand at the top! How can someone like her, without any magical skills of her own, occupy such a position?! It's undeserved!"

"…I don't follow. What makes you say she doesn't deserve it?"

"…Everything! She may have a reputation as a famous adventurer, but I wonder just how many of the stories are actually true! Her slaying of the dragon, for instance—that was Your Majesty's doing, wasn't it?! Nothing else makes sense! Who would honestly believe *she* could pull off such a feat without the power of magic?!"

For a long moment, time seemed to come to a standstill.

When I came to, I had leaped to my feet with such force that my chair was sent flying backward.

My hand had reached for the Arc-en-Ciel at my waist—and only then did I realize I hadn't equipped it because of this meeting.

The murderous rage that had taken hold of me was filling the room with suffocating pressure. Several nobles were clearly quivering in fear, while others had fallen out of their chairs.

Count Leghorn—the one responsible—was one of them. There was a shudder in his breath, a bestial whine wheezing from his throat again.

My senses, my consciousness—everything felt distant, as if I were separated from myself by a thin wall. Even the voices of those around me seemed far away, leaving me unable to make out what they were saying.

All I wanted was to give in to my impulses, so why couldn't I move? A barely contained part of me wanted to do something about this ingrate before me.

"…Your Majesty! Please, show restraint! It won't go any further!"

At long last, the voice that finally reached my ears was Lang's.

As if a film were being peeled away from me, the world came back into focus. My body was shaking, and I still felt like lashing out. Just trying to hold that urge in was unbearable.

"Lang…"

"Please calm yourself!" he shouted desperately.

With that, I finally regained a modicum of composure.

All the same, my head still felt numb, and I could barely think. It took everything I had just to endure the torrent of emotion inside me.

"This meeting is over! Her Majesty is leaving!" Lang hastily announced, pulling my hand to lead me from the council room.

Lainie, who had been waiting outside, rushed toward me. "Lady Euphyllia?! What happened?!"

"Miss Lainie, please look after Her Majesty! I'll handle the situation here! We can't allow her to stay. Please, take her to the detached palace immediately!" Lang directed.

"I—I understand!" Lainie nodded with a grim look. "Let's go, Lady Euphyllia."

I said nothing.

"Lady Euphyllia! Please, pull yourself together!" she called again.

My feet seemed rooted to the ground.

A hurricane of intense emotion raged within me, only to vanish as abruptly as it had come, leaving nothing but emptiness. That cycle repeated again and again, so dizzying that I couldn't move so much as a finger.

In the end, I had no choice but to call off my meeting with the western nobles. I couldn't even recall how exactly I made my way back to the detached palace.

CHAPTER 2
Mounting Losses

"What kind of suicidal idiot would blurt out something *that* stupid?"

Tilty, who had been summoned to my side at short notice, breathed an annoyed sigh at the unpleasant situation.

As she examined me and checked my pulse, I could finally feel my rage easing. Until a moment ago, I had been too preoccupied to do anything at all, but I was finally settling down.

"I thought something must have happened when your people practically kidnapped me, but it's ridiculous," Tilty continued. "If I had been in your shoes, I would have strangled that moron."

"M-my apologies...," Lainie murmured.

"Seriously, don't do it again, Lainie. Put yourself in my position—getting whisked off your feet and hauled out of your own house."

Lainie shrank back at Tilty's fierce glare. In her panic, not only had she rushed me to the palace, but she had Tilty all but abducted from a meeting with Halphys.

A large number of people had seen Lainie carrying her away, so I would probably have to issue a public apology later...

"So? Are you feeling better now?" she demanded.

"Um, well...I got so angry, I lost control for a moment, that's all..."

"If you ask me, the fact you lost control is unusual in itself. And those western nobles, well, they've got caught up in their own disaster letting that idiot run his mouth," she huffed.

“Yes, I certainly didn’t see that coming…,” I answered, wanting to let out a sigh myself.

What on earth had compelled that man to make such an appeal? There was nothing more dangerous than someone who couldn’t anticipate the consequences of their own actions.

That being said, I couldn’t say there weren’t others who shared Count Leghorn’s views. In fact, he probably had many like-minded associates, even if they weren’t quite as radical as he was.

I could feel another headache coming on just thinking about it. I thought the situation with the spiritualist faith had improved somewhat in recent months, but once more, I felt overwhelmed and depressed.

“He had some nerve, that’s for sure,” Tilty said. “Honestly, you could have had him beheaded then and there, and he’d have no right to complain. I mean, picking a fight with you and Anis in front of a crowd?”

“That’s right! I can’t understand what he was thinking, saying all that and bringing Lady Anis’s achievements into doubt!” Lainie added, incensed.

Tilty gave an exaggerated smirk as she shrugged her shoulders.

They had every right to be upset, both of them. I couldn’t fully suppress my indignation myself.

I couldn’t begin to imagine what Anis had been forced to go through as she set about researching magicology and developing her magical tools. She had overcome her limitations all by herself.

Her accomplishments were so great that she had defeated a rampaging dragon. Considering everything she had done, it was beyond shallow to dismiss her just because she couldn’t use traditional magic.

“Well, I guess it could make sense if you’ve been living under a rock these past few years,” Tilty remarked. “Even though that’s what the public knows, that might explain why he doubted that someone without magic could defeat a dragon.”

“If that’s true, he must doubt a lot of things…”

“Basically, he’s incompetent, right? He stuck his foot in his mouth without giving a thought to his own position. The western nobles have always kept themselves at a distance from the capital, so maybe that explains their stupid behavior. Either way, that’s no excuse for speaking out of turn,” Tilty spat.

I was in full agreement. “It’s all well and good to denounce injustice, but we have to use the right means,” I said.

“I agree. I don’t even want to know what sort of thinking led him to say all that.”

“…I’m just glad Anis wasn’t there to hear it. If she had been in the room, I might not have been able to restrain myself.”

“Indeed. At least there’s that silver lining,” Tilty snorted in assent.

The fact that Anis hadn’t been forced to endure that outrageous insult really was the only positive to all this.

No, we certainly couldn’t welcome this situation. Because of Count Leghorn, continued negotiations with the western nobles were going to be an uphill battle.

“I could try holding him accountable, but there’s no telling what sort of response that might bring…,” I grumbled.

“Right. Push him too hard, and he might have another outburst,” Tilty remarked.

If I wanted to, I could pursue any reform I chose, but there was no predicting how the western nobles, who were already distancing themselves from the capital, might receive them.

“I’d prefer to institute the reforms slowly and carefully, if at all possible,” I said. “So why do all these urgent problems have to keep popping up…?”

“Sudden changes can cause a backlash,” Tilty pointed out. “You could have the best intentions in the world, but you can’t change a country so easily.”

“It just goes to show what a huge impact Anis has had on everything…”

As beneficial as magicology and magical tools were, forcing people to adopt them would only bring about a head-on clash with the nation’s long-standing

traditions and beliefs.

Magic was a special privilege of the nobility, so changing its value risked devaluing their perceived importance and worth.

That was why I had sought the throne—to bridge the changes Anis and I wanted to bring about with the traditions that had long sustained the kingdom. After all, if the country were to split apart, Anis would suffer the most.

For that reason, I had to keep adjusting my approach to avoid conflict. Why couldn't our work all go smoothly? Were these people willfully standing in my way, or was it my fault and my exhaustion?

"I suppose I should consult Father-in-law…"

"Oh dear. Well, good luck," Tilty quipped.

"You say that like it's none of your business…"

"It *isn't* any of my business. I'm willing to listen to you complain, though."

"…Thank you."

Tilty broke out into a chuckle—and with that, I felt my face finally relaxing. Yes, I *did* feel a little better now.

"You're probably exhausted, so why don't you call it a day?" Tilty suggested. "You're always keeping things bottled up, and that takes its toll. Anis isn't here to help you relax, either."

"Well…"

"You don't want to still be worrying unnecessarily when she gets back, do you?"

"…I don't want her to hear about what happened."

"It's up to you whether or not you decide to tell her. But if you're going to keep it a secret, make sure you cover it up properly so she doesn't find out from anyone else."

"Master Lang and Duke Grantz are taking care of political matters, Lady Euphyllia, so please don't worry about them now. They mentioned turning to His Former Majesty, too, if necessary. So please, take some time to relax."

"Thank you, Tilty, Lainie. I was hoping not to have to ask Father-in-law to fill in for me too much, though…"

My father-in-law, King Orphans, had continued to assist me after relinquishing the throne, though I tried not to rely on him more than necessary, as that would defeat the point of his abdication.

With more free time on his hands, the former king had finally gotten around to the horticulture research he had always wanted to do. He already had a gentle temperament, but since his abdication, he seemed to have grown even more kindhearted.

He was here to help me when I needed it with the small details necessary to keep the kingdom running smoothly, but that didn't mean I could leave any of my responsibilities entirely to him.

That was why I didn't like asking him to deputize for me too much. Though I could see I didn't have much choice this time around.

"His Former Majesty would probably be more upset if you *didn't* ask him to help," Tilty pointed out.

"…I can't argue with that," I answered.

Yes, there were those who bandied about heartless remarks, but I *was* surrounded by people willing to support me.

I am beyond grateful to them, I thought with a faint smile.

* * *

Following Tilty's advice, I decided to take some time off to rest.

Before I knew it, it was time for dinner. Once I was finished, I would try to recuperate. But when I brought the food to my mouth, the experience was horrible.

"…? Ngh?! Gah?!"

I couldn't taste the food sitting on my tongue at all. Ever since the day I became a spirit covenantor, my attachment to food had been fading, but never before had I been unable to discern any flavors at all.

Yet my food seemed completely tasteless, and when I chewed, I found the

texture disconcerting. When I tried to swallow, it felt like some foreign object was stuck in my throat. My appetite, which was already tenuous at best, had diminished even further.

Lainie wasn't far, and she heard my cry of alarm. "Lady Euphyllia? Are you all right?"

I wanted to say I was fine, but unable to muster my voice, I gulped a mouthful of water to wash the food down my throat.

Struggling with sensations I couldn't explain, I forced a smile, hoping to reassure Lainie and to keep my distress hidden from her.

"It's nothing, really…"

"Lady Euphyllia," Lainie said again, watching me with concern. I couldn't bring myself to look away from her crimson eyes. I tried to compose myself, and yet —

"Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"…"

"Your emotions are all over the place. I can see it."

"…I'm no match for you, Lainie."

Out of habit, I had hoped to keep the issue to myself, but Lainie's vampire powers must have picked up on my agitation. Really, I couldn't hide anything from her…

I forced an awkward smile. Lainie, however, furrowed her brow, heaved a long sigh, and briskly started dishing out instructions: "You can't eat, can you? In that case, please go and lie down for the rest of the day."

"I'm sorry, Lainie…"

"Shall I call Lady Tilty again?"

"She's already looked me over once today, so I'd prefer to just see how things go."

"…You aren't pushing yourself too hard?"

"No. I'm going to get some rest, so if you could take care of everything else

for me…”

“…Very well.”

Lainie’s concerned gaze followed me as I left the dining room.

I was more than a little worried about the anxious looks the maids gave me after seeing I hadn’t eaten dinner, but hoping not to cause any unnecessary fuss, I returned to my room as if nothing were amiss.

“…What on earth was that?” I whispered, reaching out and lifting a hand to my throat.

The discomfort I had felt just moments ago had completely disappeared.

Since I hadn’t eaten much dinner, maybe there was less strain on my stomach than I had thought? That was what I tried to tell myself at least, but that explanation didn’t quite make sense.

“…Maybe I’m finding it more difficult than I expected…”

It was natural to lose your appetite when you felt depressed. Perhaps that was what had happened to me.

I couldn’t let this go on. What I needed was to take an early rest and get back to work tomorrow. The issue of the western nobles couldn’t be allowed to drag on.

With that thought, I called a maid and asked her to prepare a change of clothes. I considered taking a bath, but I decided it would be better just to get some sleep. After all, I could always freshen up tomorrow.

“Maybe I’ll read a book to take my mind off things…”

Fortunately, there were plenty of books I hadn’t gotten around to reading yet. Hoping it would lift my spirits a little, I reached for the pile of books in the corner of the room.

…But today’s irregularities weren’t yet over.

It had been a long time since I had been able to leisurely enjoy a good read, and while I was able to immerse myself in the text, when I looked up after finishing, I realized something disconcerting.

"...It's already that late?"

It was pitch-black outside. Somehow, I hadn't noticed night falling, and I must have unconsciously switched on the lights.

At first, I put it all down to being so absorbed in the book, but it was only after climbing into bed to try to get some sleep that I realized how serious this was.

"...I can't sleep?"

No matter how long I lay there, eyes closed, I couldn't doze off.

...Something was wrong. True, I had never felt particularly drowsy since becoming a spirit covenantor, but I could still sink into sleep if I wanted to.

In other words, I didn't *need* sleep because I no longer felt sleepy, but I still *could* sleep when I wanted to.

Now, however, I couldn't even do that.

"...What in the world...?"

Indescribable anxiety welled up from deep in my chest—a feeling like I was overlooking *something*, that *something* was slipping away without my realizing it.

"...I would wish you a good evening, Euphyllia, but maybe those aren't quite the right words?"

"—?!"

Had I let my guard down? I startled, noticing her presence too late.

Nonetheless, I quickly brought myself under control and turned to the voice. Moonlight shone through the window, and before I knew it, Lumi was standing before me. When I recognized my visitor, a sigh welled up in my throat.

"Lumi... Don't startle me like that."

"Oh? My apologies. Was that rude of me?"

"...That isn't a sincere apology, is it?"

"I'll leave it up to you to decide."

She was as mystifying as ever, always popping up when I least expected it. I

held my head in my hands. These surprise visits were bad for my heart. I wished she could at least talk normally…

"So what whim brings you here today?" I asked.

"It isn't a whim. I just thought I ought to keep an eye on you right now."

"…Huh?"

Lumi's smile gave way to a stern frown. "You can't sleep, can you? And you aren't eating, either? You realize that isn't normal, I hope?"

Did this mean there really was something wrong with me? My heart started racing with anxiety.

"Do you know what's happening to me, Lumi?" I asked.

"You could say that. Something must have happened today, yes? I don't have all the details, but I can see you're in a bad way."

"Then you know what these symptoms are…?"

"Just so you're aware, what you're experiencing certainly isn't normal, but it isn't precisely abnormal, either."

"…? What do you mean?"

"In a sense, *this* is your regular state now…as a spirit covenantor."

My breath caught in my throat.

Thinking about what Lumi said had me breaking out into a cold sweat. With a growing unease in my heart, I asked her, "As a spirit covenantor…? Then this…"

"The ties between your soul and your body are weakening… You're finding human interests more tiring than usual, I assume?"

Unable to deny it, I let out a low grown.

To a spirit covenantor, one's body was merely a vessel. It wasn't necessary to maintain it to continue to survive. In fact, they could end up discarding it altogether if they didn't look after it.

Knowing the risks, I had endeavored to consciously preserve my human form. And yet…

"…Why has it gotten worse all of a sudden, Lumi?"

"I wouldn't call it sudden. Like I said, this is essentially your natural state as a spirit covenantor—as a spirit. Rather, until now, you've been acting quite *unlike* a spirit," she answered, placing a finger on my forehead.

I couldn't help but turn away, afraid that she was peering into the depths of my soul.

"You don't have the energy to spare on acting human right now. *Something* must have happened to take such a toll on you both physically and mentally."

"…Well…"

"Anisphia has been away for a while, and your magical energy seems to be running low. It isn't easy coming back to your senses, is it? You have to clear your mind to the best of your ability. If you don't, you won't heal."

"…Everything's gotten so complicated," I murmured, hanging my head and covering my face with one hand.

Lumi approached to sit beside me, holding my hand and putting her weight on my shoulder.

"Well, it isn't all bad, is it?"

"…Where's the good in this?"

"You have me to help you," she answered lightly.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what to say.

It was true—without Lumi, I probably wouldn't have been able to pinpoint the cause of these symptoms, and they would have grown progressively worse…

"Having someone who understands can make all the difference. I was alone when it happened to me."

"…Ah…"

"It's hard, suffering by yourself."

"…Yes… It would be," I murmured with a tiny sigh.

My voice, as thin as if the air had been sucked out of it, dissipated into heavy

silence.

It wasn't long before Lumi was wearing her regular smile again. How much pain was she hiding behind it?

"Then again, this is my first time helping a fellow spirit covenantor."

"…You've never interacted with any others?" I asked.

Lumi shook her head. "There weren't any. They all disappeared remarkably quickly."

"Even though we're immortal?"

Lumi flashed me a faint smile.

She exuded a fleeting sense of fragility, as if she might disappear at any moment. I reached out to confirm her presence.

As I stroked her cheek, she took my free hand in her own. Then, she closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against my hand in hers.

"While still in their human bodies, I mean. Of course, their souls continue to exist even after they throw away their vessels. Although they do diffuse."

"They diffuse…?"

"The basis of their self-identity. Their memories and individuality slip away. It's like they thin out and turn invisible, losing their attachments and consciousness. Eventually, we dissolve into the fabric of the world. That's the destiny that awaits us."

I understood, of course, that what she was talking about would one day befall me, too.

If I were to cast myself aside, I could make the transformation right now.

"We don't die easily so long as we maintain our consciousness. But to stay in this world, we have to connect our wishes. Those who lose the source of their wish will gradually fade away. Our existences might continue forever, but only in a state little different from death."

"Is it possible for a spirit covenantor whose consciousness has diffused to be revived…?"

“Hm… I’ve never heard of anything like that before… But who’s to say? It might not be impossible. Hmm. In that sense, we could very well be immortal—if there is indeed the possibility of resurrection.” Lumi nodded.

She was back to her usual self; the fleeting impression she had given off a moment earlier was nowhere to be seen.

“You’re losing your human senses, so it’s important to be patient and work on getting them back. A certain amount of discomfort may help put your mind at ease.”

“You want me to put my mind at ease while I’m uncomfortable? How am I supposed to do that?”

“It’s better than feeling nothing at all. Pain and suffering have a way of keeping us grounded.”

I was left taken aback by the lightness of her response.

Would I be able to endure the pain necessary to bring myself back from the brink? I couldn’t begin to imagine. And yet Lumi…

“…Wasn’t it hard for you?” I asked.

Lumi had lived an enormously long time. But was her life really a happy one?

She let out a soft chuckle at my question before flashing me a meaningful smile. “It was. Unbearable, really. But I can’t give it up.”

“Give what up?”

“My wish when I entered into my spirit covenant.”

“Ah…”

“I was the heir to a king who intended to live forever. So I can’t abandon the Kingdom of Palettia. No matter how challenging things are, I feel I have to watch over this country until its end.”

“…You say that like it’s an obligation.”

“Indeed. It’s my duty. It can be hard at times—painful, even—but I can’t give up. I suppose I’ll just have to live with the pain forever,” she said with a cheerful laugh. “That friend of yours…Tilty? I suppose she might consider our situation a

curse."

A curse. Yes, Tilty often went on about such things, though it was eerily fitting in this context.

Magic, which the nobility in this country considered a miraculous power, could often become a curse. Spirit covenants were the ultimate example of that principle.

I couldn't deny it. In fact, the cost of my spirit covenant continued to gnaw at me even now.

"...If you could throw it away, would you?" I asked.

"Of course not," Lumi answered without a moment's hesitation.

Still plagued by my own doubts, I stared into her face.

"When it gets bad, I do sometimes wish it would end," she answered with a soft smile. "But when that happens, I remind myself of something."

"What?"

"All those times I was happy."

"And that helps...?"

"I've etched those memories of joy into my mind so I don't forget them. I've even gone so far as to write them again and again in a diary to hold on to them. Repetition is the key. There are parts I can only fill in with my imagination, but so long as I can retrace my footsteps, I can keep moving forward. Those memories are my most precious treasures," she said, resting a hand on her chest.

I was so impressed by her.

"My end is already decided. My time here is tied to this country. Once the people I wish to protect cease to be, then so will I. Until then, I'll spend my days smiling and cherishing the treasures I accumulated during my own time," she declared, her voice carrying more than a hint of pride.

Her life couldn't have been all good. Far from it. And yet she insisted on holding on to it for as long as possible.

…Was that why she seemed so radiant?

“So you see, I don’t mind suffering. I’ve held on to the happy times, and they far outweigh the pain.” Her gentle smile illustrated her point. “My memories may fade, but my footsteps are set in stone. As long as I hold that in my mind, I can keep on waiting for the end.”

I didn’t have the words to respond.

“You don’t understand?” Lumi asked.

“…I think I do…but I’m not sure.”

“That’s okay. People are like that, and we spirit covenantors are probably especially prone to uncertainty. The reason I’ve never gotten involved with other spirit covenantors before is because we’re essentially prisoners of our own wishes.”

“We’re prisoners…?”

“Indeed. That’s all we are, all that remains. If we grow apart from our wishes, there’s nothing for us to relate to. We can only hold ourselves together because our wishes continue to exist.”

I felt like I almost understood what she was trying to say.

Yet I just couldn’t explain it logically. Whatever it was, it started from a point of uncertainty, a wish.

The purer the wish, the farther it drifted from human comprehension—and the more detached it was from everything else, the farther it slipped away.

It really was a fateful connection.

“If you want to keep on living as a human, you have to cling to your humanity,” Lumi continued. “Pleasure and discomfort are both necessary parts of that. Without them, everything will grow increasingly dull,” she said, staring into my eyes, her face awash with concern.

“Did that happen to you?”

“…Yes. I’ve been through my own trials,” she answered with nod.

I would probably never be able to grasp her suffering, only to scratch the

surface of it in the shallowest of ways.

After all, I wasn't Lumi, and she wasn't me. The wishes at the center of our existences were completely different.

All the same, she was trying to be here for me. Yes, I was so grateful to her.

"I understand your anxieties, but there's no need to worry," she continued. "You're surrounded by people who care about you, you realize? You can trust them."

"Yes, I know."

"From what I've seen, you could go a lot further."

"What do you mean…?"

"Well, from my perspective, you're like a child."

"…You consider me a child?"

"Are you not? You can't do everything yourself. Fall back on the people around you."

"…You want me to give up some responsibilities?"

"I do. Until you reach a point when your own powers are no longer needed."

"…But that—"

"Sounds difficult?" Lumi broke in as if having read my mind.

I nodded. "…Yes."

It *was* difficult—I knew that in my heart.

This was the sort of thing Anis was often talking about—what you might call my goal. I still hadn't been able to accomplish it, which was why I found it so hard.

"The challenge is a part of this. After all, we both entered into spirit covenants to achieve our goals. The easiest and quickest solution is to fulfill our wishes by ourselves. Relying on others inevitably feels like taking the long way around."

"…Yes."

"But if you want to be part of a group, you *need* to trust in its other members.

You can't belong to a community otherwise."

"…I know that logically, but what if I can't really bring myself to truly believe it?"

"Then give them a little help. But you had best think carefully about *how* you choose to help them."

"How I choose to help them?"

"If it were me, I would encourage them to gain the strength they need so I *can* trust them next time. The results don't need to be immediate. So long as I know I'll be able to leave matters to them someday, that's enough. Fortunately, I have plenty of time to wait."

Lumi's words carried considerable heft. I must have let my thoughts show, as she let out a soft chuckle.

"It's okay to worry, but don't go overboard. What's right for me might not be right for you."

"I shouldn't worry too much…? That's not an easy ask, either…"

"You have to trust in your own judgment. There's always some basis for your decisions, an underlying logic for any belief. You and I are kin, but we're still separate people. I have to live by my decisions and you by yours."

"…You're a lot like Anis, you know?"

Yes, it finally hit me—Lumi's suggestion to let people think for themselves reminded me dearly of Anis.

Within moments, her face flushed. "Oh…? I suppose so. Perhaps that's why I decided to stay here. Like I said, it's because of her that I think we can coexist."

"Because of her…?"

"She considers magic a wondrous thing. To her, it's a symbol of hope, a power to help usher in the future. Her beliefs aren't too dissimilar to my own wish. That's why I enjoy watching her press forward," Lumi said. Her smile was full of genuine joy and pride.

My heart warmed with affection for Anis—yet strangely, I couldn't find a hint

of jealousy in my reaction.

My chest tightened whenever anyone showed an interest in her, but I didn't feel that way with Lumi. Maybe that was because she watched over us all like children.

"I wish I could see you all more," she said. "Perhaps you two will be the embodiment of my dreams? I plan to stay here to find out."

"Lumi..."

"You can draw on me a little if you like. I can take Anis's place at your side for a short while."

"...No one can ever take Anis's place."

"Oh? I'm not enough for you?" she joked.

I shook my head. "You're you, Lumi, and I'm grateful to have you. You don't need to replace Anis."

"...I see. That's good to know. Well, since you can't sleep anyway, let's talk. Whatever you have to say, I'll listen."

"Thank you, Lumi."

Yes, I was glad she was with me on this sleepless night.

* * *

"You should take a break from your official duties for a while, Lady Euphyllia."

"L-Lainie...? B-but that would be—"

"You need to rest!"

Lainie was shocked at first when I informed her of my condition the next morning, but she quickly composed herself and dug in her heels.

Though I tried to suggest that maybe this wasn't a good time for me to step back, she was adamant. She even went so far as to send out messages informing those I was scheduled to meet that I was indisposed.

Word of my illness spread quickly, and everyone agreed that I should take some time for myself.

"You're all being a little overprotective, don't you think…?" I suggested.

"Not at all!" Lainie fired back. "This is a matter of grave importance!"

"Lainie is right," Tilty added. "It would be insane to leave you in charge of political affairs in your state."

In my room in the detached palace, the two of them nodded in sincere agreement. I couldn't bring myself to meet their incredulous gazes.

On top of that, seeing Lumi observe the scene with her usual soft smile was equally unsettling.

"You can depend on us when you need to. We don't want to see you suffering alone, Lady Euphyllia," Lumi reminded me with a chuckle.

"…Yes. I suppose I'll take a good, long rest," I said.

"Please do. I'll see what I can find out about managing a spirit covenantor's physical condition… Although I wish I didn't have to," Tilty said with an unreadable expression.

"You don't seem to like me much, do you?" Lumi asked her. "Why is that? Because I'm too knowledgeable? Or because, like Euphyllia said, I'm a lot like Anisphia? Maybe she and I are so similar, you don't know how to respond to me?"

"…You march straight into things without the slightest hesitation. Indeed, you're just like her."

"I can see you don't hold me in any particular reverence. You don't have to act so formal around me, you know?" Lumi said with an amused smile.

Tilty twitched. She was clearly out of sorts, violently tugging at her hair.

Lumi, however, remained unfazed by Tilty's discomposure, moving closer to her. "Your name was Tilty, yes? Perhaps I'll drop by again and tease you a little more."

"Excuse me?! Why?!"

"You're here to take care of Euphyllia, aren't you? I didn't say anything earlier because it wasn't necessary, but if you're going to investigate the nature of

spirit covenantors, you'll want to draw on my knowledge and experience, no? Or were you expecting to test your theories yourself?"

At this, Tilty clicked her tongue in open annoyance. "…I thought Anis was a soft touch, but you're even worse."

"Call it my years of experience. Anis is still just a child. As are you. Then again, if you're willing to risk your own life for Euphyllia's sake, I'm willing to leave you to it."

"…Tch!"

"You called me a soft touch, but couldn't you say the same for yourself?"

"Ngh! Why do I have to put up with this?!" Tilty groaned, planting a hand flat on her face.

As I watched from the sidelines, I felt genuinely sorry for her. "I don't want to cause you any trouble, Tilty. You don't have to do this if you don't want to…"

"I can't turn this down just because of *her*. That would hardly be reasonable, would it?"

"Oh-ho. I'm sure we'll get along splendidly." Lumi chuckled.

Tilty's face warped as she glared back at her. Her eyes were like daggers.

The spirit covenantor, however, flashed her an easy smile, unafraid in the slightest. "Oh, how scary. I'm fond of you as well, you know?"

"Hmph! You're a weird one! You definitely act based on your heart, not your head!"

"Indeed. Perhaps that's why I've taken a liking to you?" Lumi grinned.

Tilty gnashed her teeth, a vein throbbing on her forehead.

"…Is it really okay to leave them alone together?" Lainie asked softly.

"I…can't say… They're both good people, so I'm sure it will be fine."

"…You really think so?"

Lainie continued to stare across at me, but I couldn't meet her gaze. Besides, Lumi wasn't the kind of person to give up simply because I asked her to…

Meanwhile, Tilty continued to ruffle her hair in agitation, her voice growing increasingly hoarse. “Ngh! Argh! This is such a pain! Those out-of-control western morons! Mark my words, I’ll get back at them one day!”

“There’s no need to go that far…”

If we got into a fight with the western nobles, we would have even more trouble on our hands. That being said, I never would have expected Tilty to end up suffering because of them.

“Ngh! Let’s crush the lot of them!”

…Nor would I have guessed that Anis, after hearing the full story, would say such a thing.

CHAPTER 3
A Dragon Slayer's Fury

After I was forced to retreat to my room to recuperate, Anis returned from the magicology city, having received an urgent dispatch from Lainie.

Clearly concerned for my well-being, Anis flashed me a soft smile after I told her everything that had happened.

"I see… So that's it."

"Yes… Sorry for making you worry."

"This isn't your fault, Euphie. Don't beat yourself up about it."

"I suppose not…"

I had been trying not to stress over my situation, given that Lainie would quickly sense my anxiety. Yet when I let my mind wander back to that incident, I couldn't help but fret. Lainie tried to help whenever my mental state got too bad, but I felt guilty about troubling her all the time, so I made a conscious effort to endure in silence.

Bringing this up always dampened my spirits. But that avoidance prevented me from realizing something vital, and only after Anis heard me out did I appreciate how naive I was.

"Ugh. What a hassle."

She murmured quietly. I'm sure she didn't even know she'd spoken aloud, but I knew it was how she truly felt.

A bad premonition—a terrible warning—ran through my mind. Something was wrong. I couldn't be entirely sure what it was, but my senses were telling me not to overlook this irregularity.

I observed Anis carefully, trying to get to the bottom of this sensation.

She, until then hanging her head, slowly looked up, and I could see her disappointment.

"...Anis?" I called out uneasily.

Yet she didn't respond—to the point where I questioned if she had even heard my voice.

The next moment, her lips curled in a soft smile—yet I still couldn't bring myself to relax.

Why? Because her eyes weren't smiling at all.

"Go and rest, Euphie," she said at last. "I'll take care of everything."

"...What are you saying, Anis?"

"I'm the one he slandered, so I should be the one to settle it, right?"

"Hold on a minute, Anis."

"It's fine."

"What exactly is fine about that, Anis? What are you hoping to achieve?"

Without realizing it, I reached out and grasped her wrist. Gently, she tried to pry my hand off, but I only tightened my grip, refusing to let go.

Once she realized I wasn't about to drop the matter so easily, she stopped trying to pull away.

"I was wrong," she said at last.

"...About what?"

"Everything. I was naive... I suppose I got complacent because it seemed my dreams were coming true. Or maybe I never gave it enough thought in the first place. I wasn't self-aware enough. I wasn't determined enough. I wasn't working hard enough. And now it's come back to haunt me."

She spoke quietly, as if she was talking to herself—and with every word, my anxiety grew. Why on earth was she punishing herself over this?

"This is my fault," she continued. "I can't let you take the blame, Euphie. Don't worry. I'll handle it from here."

“Anis, explain to me what exactly you’re going to do. I won’t let go until you come clean.”

She looked into my eyes. Despite her gentle expression, there was something unmistakably abnormal about the fire in her eyes.

I had never seen her like this. Was that why I felt so nervous? Because I didn’t know what to expect?

…No. Maybe it was more that I didn’t want to face reality until she spoke her intentions out loud.

“Euphie, I’m going to crush the aristocrats from the west.”

…*Ah.* My breath was barely audible as it escaped my throat.

I could feel anxious sweat forming on my skin, and a bad taste was rising in my mouth. No, this wouldn’t do at all.

…I had never seen Anis so full of rage.

“Hold on a minute, Anis. Calm down, please.”

“I am calm.”

“You wouldn’t have said that if you were calm.”

“I said it *because* I’m calm. This is only going to keep gnawing at you, and seeing as it took place in public, we can’t pretend it never happened. So it’s up to me, the one called into question in the first place, to resolve it. Right?”

“That doesn’t mean *crushing* the western nobles…!”

“No matter what I do, there’s no saving them. So what other choice do I have?” she said coolly.

Her smile did not put me at ease. It was a chilling smirk that made me want to draw away from her. I knew her contempt wasn’t directed at me, but it still made me shudder.

Her usual glow, as warm as the sun, was gone. Now, she was only icy—to the point where it felt as if I had a blade pressed up against my throat.

I doubted she noticed my unease as she continued, “It was Count Leghorn who blew up the meeting, right? But if we punished him, it would look like

we're tacitly approving of the west's corruption. And if we judged all the nobles based on his accusation, we'd be setting a dangerous precedent. So maybe we should just punish the ones who were at the meeting? If we do that, there would be no need to go after the whole lot of them."

"…Well…"

"There's no room for half measures. If we're too easy on them, our reputations will suffer, so I have to bring them all into line. This isn't on you, Euphie; it's on me."

Anis's voice was firm and decisive. The unsettling glint in her eyes told me she was dead serious.

When she made up her mind, she absolutely meant it. I hated to admit it, but her will was ironclad.

"I'm the one they've picked a fight with. If Count Leghorn is going to spread lies about my achievements, then I'll face him head-on and smash him to pieces."

"Anis!"

"The only reason the kingdom isn't fully united is because I could never use magic. That's all it is. Again and again, they keep hounding me for it… I've had it up to here with them."

I had no idea what to say to her.

Until now, she had always laughed these things off with an air of resignation. Now, however, her response was different.

"I was too naive. The nobles are always clinging to magic and tradition. If I let them run their mouths unchecked, the same thing could happen all over again. It's better to crush every last one of them."

"Do you expect me to stand by and let you do that?!" I exclaimed, unable to bear it anymore.

Anis's outburst was simply too cruel. There wasn't a shred of mercy in her. She was ruthlessly, bone-chillingly composed.

Looking at her now, she reminded me of the time she went to confront

Algard. She was suppressing her emotions, trying as best she could to push the conversation forward dispassionately.

Witnessing her in this state was the last thing I wanted. My heart felt like it was being torn to pieces.

"But I don't *want* you to do anything of the sort! Who would be hurt most if you went ahead with that plan?! You would, Anis!" I cried, grabbing her by the shoulders.

Anis, however, simply stared back at me in silence.

Fighting the urge to flinch, I forced myself to meet her gaze. Her eyes were almost quivering with rage.

"Are you saying I should sacrifice you to protect myself?" she fired back.

"Don't you know why I took the throne…?!"

"I do. And I promised I would forgive a certain amount of unreasonableness. But *this* I can't tolerate. I won't forgive those western nobles for what they've done."

"Anis!"

"…If I knew I'd be this disappointed, maybe I shouldn't have had any expectations in the first place."

I felt so, so heavy. A weight was pushing down on my heart with every word she said, and I couldn't bear it.

How much easier life would be if I surrendered to these feelings, if I let Anis run amok until she was fully satisfied…

If it means the kingdom's destruction, then so be it—right?

Because that was what was at stake here. She'd stepped aside willingly for the sake of the country, even as people were spreading terrible rumors about her. She'd responded with a simple smile when they accused her of being unqualified to lead.

I respected her achievements more than anything else. I had cheered her on for as long as I could. I couldn't begin to imagine the pain she had gone through

to get as far as she had, only for her successes to go unrecognized.

Now that I stopped to think about it, it was a miracle she had endured so much. After everything she had suffered, maybe it was okay for her to let loose? If she brought about the kingdom's downfall, well, that was only natural.

And yet…

I clenched my jaw, letting out an unpleasant grinding noise. I had to resist the urge to get swept away by my emotions, although my teeth might be chipped in the process.

No, this wouldn't do at all. I couldn't let Anis down. After all, I had sworn to protect her.

"I won't allow it, Anis."

"…Let go of me, Euphie."

"No! If I don't stop you now, you'll regret it for the rest of your life!"

"…I already regret it," she said, her eyes darkening.

Her grin was devoid of strength. It was as if her muscles were weighted with lead, and she was fighting gravity.

Had Anis given up on everything? Was this what it had all come to? I strengthened my grip as I held firm to her wrist.

"If we're talking about regrets, I've been carrying them with me for ages. How long do I have to keep swallowing them down? How much do I have to endure before my wishes become reality? How much longer do I have to struggle before I can feel truly at ease? Tell me, Euphie—when will I finally, honestly be able to forgive everything that's happened?"

"I don't know…"

"If all I do is sit around waiting, the answer is never. I have to change things myself. I don't want to shed blood, at least not more than I must. I want to defend what Father and the others always protected. But in the end, it's all futile."

"No, it isn't! We've only just begun!"

"Really? Can you honestly say that? I don't care if people love their faith. It's our culture, and it's sustained the country for generations. Without it, we would never have been a united people. It's because of everyone's belief in spirits that the kingdom still exists. There's no doubt about that," Anis said, staring downward. I was unable to read her expression.

She placed her hand on mine. Was I imagining things? It felt unnaturally cold, as if the blood had frozen in her veins.

"But times have changed. Royalty, too, and the aristocracy, and the common folk—nothing stays the same. The world never stands still."

"Anis…"

"Time is like a current, and I don't want to see it flow in the wrong direction. In my own way, I've been doing my best to keep it following a decent course." She scoffed, then broke out into a laugh. Her expression as she lifted her face was full of scorn. "And what's the result? It's laughable."

Who, exactly, was her derision aimed at? The unprincipled nobility? The country? …Or herself?

I was getting dizzy. My ears rang as if dozens of alarm bells were sounding simultaneously. I had to say *something*, but the words were caught in my throat.

"It's my naïveté that put you through so much pain, Euphie."

"Anis, I—"

"I'm glad you were willing to shoulder this burden for me. That's why I want to be here for you, why I want to support you as queen."

Her voice as she addressed me was as gentle as could be—yet that gentleness was completely hollow.

She continued, "It seems to me the western nobles never respected you in the first place. They probably only ever saw you as a convenient instrument of their faith. They don't even see you as a liege they're obliged to serve. You know what will happen if we let that attitude spread, right?"

"I…"

Try as I might, I couldn't deny her argument.

There had always been people trying to present me as an abstract ideal to suit their own agenda. I gave them a stern warning whenever it happened, but this was the first time the conversation hadn't gone as I'd hoped.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed. I felt even angrier at the thought that they were making Anis suffer.

But knowing her, she should have been able to find some way to manage. If she could keep going, then I could endure, too.

I had to know—why did she suddenly feel like giving up?

And if I allowed her to…what was I supposed to do next?

"In a way, it's convenient they decided to insult me. Now I can take care of everything. I'll make sure you aren't remembered as the villain, Euphie. They picked a fight with me, and they'll get themselves wiped out. That's all. I don't want them to apologize or say they'll mend their ways. I'll simply get rid of them once and for all."

"Please don't say that! Anis, calm down! You're out of control!"

"Are you saying I should just shut up and take it?!"

Anis's anger erupted like a burst of flame on a dark night, and I jolted with confusion and shock.

Not only that, but her dragon magic was pouring out in response to her emotions; the air seemed to be shrieking with it. I watched her eyes slowly morph into those of a dragon. She was beginning to lose herself…!

"I don't care if they deride me. Their spiritualist faith has already rejected me. It doesn't matter what feats I pull off—nothing will ever undo that. I've always wanted them to accept me, but I understand now. Some of them never will."

She gnashed her teeth fiercely enough for me to hear. I worried she was about to bite off her own lips.

She stared into empty space. "But I can't stand them trying to use you for their own ends. They pushed you until you were ill! How far are they trying to take this?! And you're telling me I shouldn't be angry?!"

"But Anis…! I don't want to see you get hurt!"

"I didn't want this to happen to you, either!"

"Anis!"

What was I supposed to do? Unable to think of a solution, I felt tears welling up in my eyes. If I couldn't stop her, then…!

At that moment, a calm voice spoke, unfazed by Anis's threats of violence. "Cool your head, Anisphia."

"Lumi?!"

Yes, there she was, as elusive as ever. How long had she been watching us?

Anis wavered and turned to Lumi.

The older spirit covenantor ran a hand through Anis's hair. "You have a terrible look on your face, Anis. You sound like you're going to destroy the whole kingdom."

"…So what?"

"If you keep shouting like that, people outside are going to notice. Just think of the inevitable rumors if anyone saw you in this state."

"…Shut up! You think I don't realize that?!"

"I know you're not stupid. You're normally quite attentive, in fact. But right now you're far from calm."

"Would you prefer I don't care?! It's their fault Euphie is…!"

Anis stopped there, but her eyes were still burning. I briefly worried she would even attack Lumi.

"If you care about Euphie, that's all the more reason to relax," Lumi warned her sternly. "She doesn't have anyone else she can rely on, and now you, of all people, are pushing her away?"

"No, I'm not…!"

"Then take a look at her face," Lumi urged.

Anis did not. Instead, she stared at the floor, clenching her fists.

Lumi folded her arms and breathed an exasperated sigh. "You can't, can you? You realize you're making a scene, don't you?"

"…Shut up."

“Why don’t you take in your surroundings a little?”

“I said shut up!”

“Yes, I can be annoying, can’t I? It stings. I can hear it in your voice—you know I’m right.”

“…Ngh!”

“If you want me to be quiet, then don’t force me to speak. You’ve brought this on yourself. So take a deep breath and calm down,” Lumi said.

At this, Anis closed her mouth and fell into a heavy silence.

After a long moment, she inhaled deeply—and the anger that had been filling the air slowly subsided.

When she had finally quieted down, Lumi nodded in satisfaction and gave her a pat on the shoulder. The smile on her face was bright and maternal.

“Well done.”

“…”

“Now that you’ve calmed down, try talking to Euphie properly. You both care about each other after all.”

“…”

“Anisphia, I’m not telling you not to feel angry. But it would be a shame to sever your connections in a fit of passing emotion. That’s a mistake you’ll regret to the end of your days.”

“…I know.”

“Then you should rest awhile with Euphie. You must be tired after rushing back to the capital. Why don’t you enjoy each other’s company a little?” Lumi said.

Then, with a light wave, she left the room.

I stared at the closed door for a while longer, then quickly turned my attention back to Anis.

She continued to sit hunched over, looking downcast. Given what had just

happened, I wasn't sure how to begin.

Still, I would hate myself even more if I didn't help us move on from this. And so I gathered my courage, about to call out to her when she all but flung herself toward me.

As I braced myself, she wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug.

"…Anis?" I asked.

She said nothing. Her body merely shook slightly as she continued to hold me.

Without saying anything more, I embraced her back, feeling shivers course through her. Pretending not to notice, I stayed that way for a while. I don't know how long we sat there before Anis broke the silence.

"…I'm sorry. I lost my temper."

"That's understandable. If our positions were reversed, I would have been just as angry."

"…I'm really sorry, Euphie."

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't. I never wanted to make *you* console *me*."

"…It's fine; you didn't…"

I wanted to protest harder, but Anis's shaking increased in intensity as she pulled me closer.

I couldn't see her face, but I could tell she was crying.

"What if you never regain your human senses…?" she said under her breath. "When I asked myself that, I started thinking we should just get it all over with here and now."

"…It's my fault," I murmured.

Because of me, she thought she was too weak. It was painful seeing her so completely defenseless.

I had entered my spirit covenant so she wouldn't have to make an impossible decision, and now I had ended up failing her.

But if I gave voice to that thought, it would only end up hurting her even more.

Without lifting her face, she shook her head slightly from side to side. “I don’t want you to blame yourself, Euphie.”

“But it’s true…”

“You’re the victim here. It isn’t your fault. So why are you blaming yourself?” she asked, looking up at me.

Tears were coursing down her cheeks.

“It was all a selfish false accusation. It’s completely unacceptable. So don’t take responsibility for something you didn’t do,” she insisted.

“…Aren’t you one to talk? You’ve always held yourself responsible when something goes wrong,” I pointed out.

Besides, she had endured a lot worse in life than I had.

If she could put up with all the trials, then I could endure them, too. I’d set off down this path so she wouldn’t have to suffer anymore, but I had ended up hurting her anyway…

“…I only realized it when our situations were reversed,” she said. “I thought I understood, but I didn’t. I can’t bear it.”

“Anis…”

“If it was only me, I could tolerate it. But when they hurt you, and when you try to force yourself to swallow it down, I feel like I have to do something. And when there isn’t anything I can do, when no one’s asking anything of me, I feel disgusted at myself…”

Once again, Anis buried her face in my chest.

“That goes for both of us,” I said, gently stroking her back. “Which is why we have to support each other… I know you worry about me, just as I worry about you. But when we get angry, we can’t convey our feelings properly, and then we get bitter and distracted, and we lose sight of what we really ought to do…”

“I know…”

“I can’t hold it against you, Anis. I can’t be angry with you. You make me so happy. I’m sorry I’ve made you worry, but my heart warms to see how much you care.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, Anis.”

“I’m so sorry…!”

“I told you, it’s okay.”

“Ugh… Ugh…! I’m really, really, *really* sorry…!” She apologized again and again. Her voice was so innocent, it sounded almost like a young child’s. “I get so anxious, you know? It’s scary. When you stop being yourself and it feels like you’re drifting further and further away…”

“That goes for you, too, don’t you think?”

“Just because I can put up with it doesn’t mean I want to see you suffer…!”

“I could say the same thing.”

“It all comes back to me…! I’ve hurt you, Euphie…! I’m so sorry, I can’t bear it…!”

I hadn’t seen her cry this much since Algard was banished to the frontier and she was made next in line for the throne.

A wave of guilt fell over me, but at the same time, I felt a smile forming on my face.

“I’m the one who should be apologizing, Anis… I’m so happy, I could cry. I know how deeply you care about me.”

“You’ve given me so much, too, Euphie…!”

“I’m truly happy.”

“But…it’s *because* of this happiness that it’s so painful. I wish I’d never had these dreams at all. They’re what’s destroying you. I know it, but I still can’t stop feeling this way…!”

“…You don’t have to worry so much, Anis.”

“Then what am I supposed to do with all this anger…?!” she cried out, a tremble in her voice.

I didn’t have an answer for her. After all, I was asking myself the very same question.

Why did I have to protect people who tried to hurt my beloved Anis? Why was I defending the country that continued to do her harm?

Yet I couldn’t give voice to such doubts. I would only hurt her even more if I did.

“I know I can’t do anything,” she murmured. “I know…but I still don’t like it…”

“…I know the feeling.”

“Do you remember when you said you wished you were the only one who had to get hurt?”

“…Yes, I did say something like that, didn’t I?”

“I wanted the same thing—to shield you from everyone who wanted to hurt you. Do you remember what you said…?”

“…That I didn’t want you to lose your own sense of self. That I didn’t want you to be held back by people who don’t care about you. That I wanted you to keep moving forward, even if it hurt. I was trying to tell you that you don’t have to give anything up if you don’t want to,” I answered.

Anis’s eyes glistened, and large tears spilled down her cheeks as her face twisted in sorrow.

All I wanted was to protect her smile, so seeing her crying her eyes out for my sake filled me with an emotion I was struggling to describe.

“I’m a poor loser. Because of that, you’ve lost more than you had to. It doesn’t bother you? You don’t have regrets?” Anis asked.

“I can’t think like that. I won’t. That would be a betrayal of what I wanted for you—for us.”

“I made you choose, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

"…It's like a curse."

"I consider it more of a blessing."

"But still…"

"It's fine, Anis."

"…What's fine?"

"We promised each other not to turn the blessing of magic into a curse, didn't we? So long as we have each other, we can overcome these challenges. That's why we joined hands," I said, intertwining my fingers around hers. "We'll support each other through the hard times. That's what we should have done from the beginning."

"…Euphie."

"I'm sorry. I should have called you here myself instead of making you worry. I should have told you how hurt I was, how scared I felt. I should have trusted you to make it all better."

"…Yeah."

"…I was afraid. I couldn't control myself, and I didn't want to end up destroying your dreams."

"You idiot! Take care of yourself first before worrying about my dreams!"

"And please, don't go about laying waste to the western region for my sake."

"Then what do I do with all this anger?!"

"…I know it will be hard. Life would be so much easier if we could do whatever we wanted whenever we wanted it."

But neither of us, I knew, would choose to go down that path. Not while we had our dreams and love to bind us.

That might've seemed like a curse to some, but I preferred to think of it as a blessing—a tether keeping us from making irreversible mistakes.

"We made those vows to keep ourselves in check. We're both juggling so much, we wouldn't be able to keep up otherwise. What we're doing is important, so we have to keep going, no matter how much it hurts…"

"…You're right."

"We might find some relief breaking it all. But I don't want to destroy it… Yes, it hurts. But still…I'm happy, Anis."

Anis started crying, her whole body shaking in my arms.

We said no more as we held each other close.

Like children waiting for a storm to pass, we bowed our heads in silence, each reflecting on our own thoughts.

INTERLUDE
Lainie's Mission

I stood in the hallway breathless, wondering when the door would swing open.

With Lady Euphyllia falling suddenly ill, I had reached out to Lady Anis, who sped back to the capital. They had asked me to wait outside, and yet…

"Are they really okay…?"

A few minutes earlier, Anis's presence had seemed to grow more tumultuous. Something was wrong.

Even from outside, I could hear angry voices shouting from the other side of the door. It was enough to make my legs tremble. Maybe Lady Anis's dragon magic was flaring up along with her emotions?

I had only my senses to go on, but just thinking about how enraged she must be had me breaking out into a cold shiver.

I hoped Lady Euphyllia would be okay. I continued fretting for the longest moment, but at last, it seemed like Lady Anis's outburst was settling down.

All the same, my unease lingered. After a long wait, the door opened.

It was an unexpected face that greeted me—Lady Lumi's.

"Lady Lumi?!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, Lainie. Hello." She greeted me with her usual cryptic smile.

I had never had an opportunity before to really talk to her. Besides Lady Anis and Lady Euphyllia, she hardly spoke to anyone other than His Former Majesty King Orphans.

Naturally, our paths had crossed, seeing as I was often at Lady Euphyllia's side, but we had never actually addressed each other one-on-one.

But what was she doing in there? My mind wandered, hoping the other two were all right. After all, it didn't look like they were coming out.

Perhaps sensing my concern, Lady Lumi let out a soft chuckle. "Let's leave them alone for a little while. They'll settle down soon."

"How are Lady Anis and Lady Euphyllia? Lady Anis seemed extremely angry a moment ago…"

"Oh, she was livid. She could have murdered everyone who had ever done Euphyllia wrong."

"I see…"

I myself was filled with rage over that western noble's unforgivable insult, so it was little wonder Lady Anis was so incensed.

Nonetheless, it was a mistake to wear one's resentment and bitterness so openly. Unable to keep up, I breathed a resigned sigh.

"Well, there's no need to worry," Lady Lumi continued. "I kept Anis from getting out of control. After all, Euphyllia's condition would have worsened even more if she'd gone on a rampage."

"Thank you."

"There's no need for thanks… But might I ask you something?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Does it make you feel uneasy having a nonhuman ruler?"

"Huh…?"

I couldn't formulate an immediate response to that question, yet Lady Lumi stared quietly at me, waiting for an answer. We had met several times in the past, but she had never fixed me with such an intense stare.

Yes, there was something otherworldly about her. I couldn't read her one little bit.

Part of me wanted to use my vampire powers to probe deeper into her emotions, but something about that idea scared me. She had lived a long time as a spirit covenantor, and there was no telling what I might find.

While I was still thinking over my answer, Lady Lumi continued, “Neither of them is an ordinary human. If they wanted, they could destroy the kingdom with ease. I wouldn’t be able to stop them. And if *I* couldn’t stop them, who could?”

“Um…”

“Doesn’t it make you uneasy? The country is headed by two incredibly dangerous beings that have little in common with ordinary people. There’s no telling when they might show their true colors and turn against us. They could lose all control because of matters no one else can fully understand. It’s a scary thought, don’t you think?”

“…It is. But I believe in them both.”

“Oh? A splendid answer. But how many people, I wonder, could say the same? You can vouch for them because you’re often with them. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“…Yes, I suppose.”

“The further away they are, the less a person’s true nature is understood. They both possess overwhelming power, and Euphyllia holds the title of spirit covenantor, which carries great significance in this country. I wonder how many people can truly understand what lies in their hearts?”

Very few, no doubt. That was what I thought, but I couldn’t say it out loud. If I did, I would have to face a reality I didn’t want to acknowledge.

One could blame the world for being so unfair, but then I would hate the circumstances that forced all this on them. Why couldn’t people just understand them for who they were?

“It’s not fair, is it?”

“…No, I can’t deny it.”

It was human nature—people feared that which they couldn’t understand, and so they tried to keep it at a distance or else eliminate it entirely.

“You wish to continue understanding them both,” Lady Lumi went on. “So long as you understand them, so long as they remain the beings you expect

them to be, you don't fear them."

"…Have you seen it?" I asked.

"Seen what?"

"What Lady Euphyllia is like…when she's angry…?"

Lady Lumi shook her head. "I wasn't there. Though I can imagine from what I've heard."

"I see…"

"I don't think Euphyllia's policies are wrong per se. However, that doesn't mean everyone is going to accept them. This country has clung to its belief in spirits for generations. People aren't going to let go so easily. It's a time of great trials."

"Great trials…?"

"I wonder who is really being tested here. Those two children? Or the country itself?" Lady Lumi murmured, averting her gaze. "Without a doubt, Anisphia and Euphyllia hold the fate of the Kingdom of Palettia in their hands. They complement each other; one prevents the other from going berserk. But it's a precarious balance. If either wanted to, they could destroy the country. It all comes down to love."

"Love…?"

They could destroy out of love. Yes, those words struck home.

After all, Lady Anis had so many reasons to hate the Kingdom of Palettia, to want to see it come to ruin.

She had been oppressed for so long as a royal princess unable to use magic. On top of that, her younger brother, Algard, had been driven to near madness by the attitudes of other nobles. And of course, her parents had been constantly subjected to hardship, too.

Lady Anis had every reason to resent the world, yet she pursued not revenge but the fulfillment of her dreams. It was a choice, and she didn't choose destruction. That was all.

Why? Because she loved so many things—her family, magic, the Kingdom of Palettia, its people.

Love triumphed over hate. That was why she had never acted out of resentment.

…But what if that balance were reversed?

If her hatred outweighed her love, nothing would ever stop her. The power that drove her dreams would turn to destruction. Yes, it wasn't difficult to imagine the devastation that would ensue.

"So long as they both continue to pursue their ideals, they will have to face new trials," Lady Lumi said. "It's up to them to overcome them."

"…Are they going to be able to do it?"

"Who knows? What I will say is that nothing ever goes entirely as you expect after entering into a spirit covenant. It's a transaction that gives great power—but in exchange, you have to accept whatever consequences the future brings."

"Future consequences…"

"Humans are mortal creatures. We all die, one way or another. But the death of a spirit covenantor is no easy thing. We are existence itself. If you consider life eternal, then it's tantamount to immortality. You become a spirit, dissolving into the world and becoming a part of it while forgetting everything you ever were. Would you call that living?"

I grimaced at Lady Lumi's question.

Eternity—it was a word that haunted me like a curse. As a vampire, I could never turn my back on the concept; it was a burden I, too, would always have to bear.

As much as I could, I tried not to think about it—but at times like this, when someone else brought it up, my spirits fell. I had to breathe a deep sigh in an effort to pull myself together.

"My apologies. I hope I didn't upset you," Lady Lumi said.

"No, don't worry. I understand I have to face that aspect of myself."

“You’re admirable; you all are. It’s a huge part of your charm,” she said with a chuckle.

Lady Lumi was a hard one to pin down, but it was clear she cared about us all in her own way. That said, I did find her inscrutable behavior more than a little challenging.

At that moment, she fell silent, her expression turning solemn. “It’s important to face life’s trials, but there’s no need to feel pessimistic. You have each other for support. I’m glad Euphyllia has Anisphia. So long as they look out for one another, my fears, I hope, won’t come to pass. But that’s assuming they continue to support each other.”

“I don’t see them drifting apart,” I pointed out.

“That’s true. They’re unlikely to abandon each other, not willingly. But the power they each possess is immense. Remove just a few of the restraints, and they could destroy the world. It’s because of their self-control that they’re still functioning as part of society. But they could turn their backs on everyone at any moment.”

My shoulders jerked slightly at those words.

“They need to constantly hold themselves in check, to firmly push back against their urges. And the stronger one is, the stronger that discipline has to be. Even then, they might break.”

I bit my lip so hard, I could have chewed right through it.

“A spirit covenant is the result of a wish you want to see come true even at the cost of your own life. Once you’ve entered into it, you have no choice but to live bound forever to that wish. You understand what that means, don’t you? Happiness becomes a most difficult thing.”

“…Yes.”

“Anisphia’s powers likewise teeter on the brink of destruction. Yet humans continue to cling to such immense power.”

At that moment, from behind the closed door, I heard someone crying.

It was Lady Anis, and she sounded like a small child bawling their eyes out.

What was behind her tears? She was probably asking herself why Lady Euphyllia had to suffer.

It was all because people kept on selfishly imposing their own ideals. Yes, things hadn't changed at all since Algard's time. People were still hurting each other the same as they always had.

It was unforgivable, enough to make me grind my teeth in frustration.

"…Have you ever asked yourself if it might not be better if this country never existed?" Lady Lumi asked in a soft voice.

"I would never…"

"The world is immensely vast. There are plenty of places you can live without any need for magic. Don't you think all this unhappiness could be avoided if we abandoned magic altogether?"

"As someone who was oppressed for a long time, I have no love for this country. I have mixed feelings about the current status quo."

"In that case, haven't you ever asked yourself if we would be better off without the Kingdom of Palettia specifically?"

"Never," I answered without hesitation.

At that, Lady Lumi turned to face me, fixing me with a hard, perceptive stare. I could see my own reflection in her eyes.

"You say that so easily. You didn't need time to think?"

"I was born in this country, and it's because of it that I've met the people I care about. I can't give up on it just because of the hardships I've faced, especially not when I want to support Lady Anis's wish for magic to be a blessing, not a curse. I can live with the problems."

"…Hmm. I see."

"Well… That's also why I'm so mad about this latest problem, though…," I said, finally able to let out a small laugh.

Drawn in by my lighthearted response, Lady Lumi broke into a relaxed and gentle smile.

"…I've always known happiness doesn't last forever," she said at last.

"Lady Lumi…?"

"Everything must come to an end. Or perhaps I just feel the need to end it somewhere. But I still want to see where this country is headed. It might feel empty and hollow at times, but this is still the land that my loved ones fought to defend," she murmured.

I was left utterly speechless. Part of me warned I shouldn't interrupt, that I had to hear her out.

"That's why I always wanted it to have a beautiful ending, but I know that's a selfish thing to ask for. Yet I still want it. Yes, when it comes down to it, we're selfish creatures at heart."

"…Maybe."

"I couldn't bring myself to leave Anisphia and Euphyllia to their own devices. Those girls…when I looked at them, I saw hope."

"Hope?"

"That this country we all wished for doesn't need the happiness we thought it did. That its people could surpass the happiness we had in mind for them. That when such a time comes to pass, I won't be needed anymore."

"…Lady Lumi…do you want to die?"

"Well…if possible, I'd like to fall asleep and dream, knowing I'll never have to open my eyes again. That, to me, would be the best way to end things. Not to give up because I'm not required, but to choose a future that will be okay without me." Lady Lumi spoke in a soft voice, earnestly praying for that day to come. "I hope their wishes will be the conclusion of my own. It's for that reason I can't bring myself to leave them alone. In the past, I might have given up halfway and gone back to the forest."

"Thank you for staying. I, for one, greatly appreciate your being here."

After all, without Lady Lumi, this situation would have been much more chaotic. I couldn't have been more relieved to have her near at hand.

But at the same time, I wondered if this really was for the best. According to

Lady Lumi, the world would be a better place without spirit covenantors, who continued to exist eternally bound by their desires. Yet those dreams weren't necessarily always fulfilled the way they hoped. It was a sobering thought.

Perhaps Lady Euphyllia felt the same way. Was that why they both believed spirit covenants should be things of the past?

But in that case, what was I supposed to do? How could we prevent more people from entering into them?

Lady Euphyllia became a spirit covenantor for Lady Anis. And it was the nature of the kingdom itself that brought Lady Anis to suffering. The problem ultimately lay with the corrupt nobility. Which meant…

Just as my thoughts reached this point, Lady Lumi, still smiling, posed another question: "What are you going to do now?"

"…What am I going to do?"

"Something tells me you feel like giving a little push."

"I do…"

"Yes, I thought as much."

I gave a faint smile.

There was no doubt about it—I was eager to get moving. I couldn't stand to have things stay the way they were.

"I'll do what I can," I continued. "It wouldn't be right to make Lady Euphyllia and Lady Anis shoulder everything."

"Yes. Well, good luck. I'll keep an eye on them both."

"Thank you, Lady Lumi," I said as I watched her go.

Then, with almost perfect timing, Lady Ilia appeared down the hall just as I thought to go looking for her.

"Lainie."

"Lady Ilia. Thank you for showing Master Navre and the others in."

When Lady Anis said she wanted to speak to Lady Euphyllia alone, I had asked

Lady Ilia to take care of the other guests.

I was glad I had run into her, as there were a few things I wanted to discuss with them all.

"I explained the situation as best I could," she began.

"Thank you. Could we all talk over tea perhaps?" I asked.

"Of course."

And so the two of us made our way to the room where the others were already waiting.

When we stepped inside, Master Navre, his expression stern, was the first to turn our way. "Lainie, are Commander Anisphia and Queen Euphyllia okay…?"

"They're still talking in their room. It seems Lady Anis lost her temper, though…"

"Was that surge of magical energy we felt *her*, then…?" Master Navre grimaced.

"…Talk about scary. It gave us the shivers all the way over here. She must have been seeing red, all right," Gark added as he held his arms and rubbed them to dispel a cold chill.

Indeed, that surge of bloodlust had given me pause, too. Just thinking about it stirred up bitter feelings.

"…If she hadn't cooled down, she might have taken the fight to the western nobles herself…," I explained.

"That bad, huh…? Well, we've heard what happened. I get why she's mad, but this is turning into a huge headache…," Gark muttered, looking like he was on the verge of cursing.

"But if she well and truly lost her cool, who could stop her? I wish people would know when to shut their mouths. Seriously, what was that idiot thinking…?" Master Navre said, his face downcast.

I could understand how they both felt—which was why we had to formulate a plan to move forward.

“I’m sorry, everyone, but could I ask for your help with something?” I said.

“With what?” Master Navre asked.

“I’d like to give the two of them some more time alone together, but I also think it would be unwise of us to ignore the situation. I want to make our own preparations, so I’m thinking of calling Master Lang and the others to talk things over.”

His eyes widened in surprise.

I paused for a moment. Was my suggestion really so out of the blue?

“Lainie,” he said, “you mean you want to discuss the western nobles?”

“Yes. In any case, *someone* is going to have to act. I want everything to be in place when Lady Euphyllia and Lady Anis decide to respond.”

“So you want to see Lang and the other royal advisors…?”

“Yes. If possible, I’d like to talk with them immediately after this.”

But would they all come? Given I had left Master Lang with the western nobles after Lady Euphyllia’s breakdown, they might not. If he couldn’t talk, I would just have to give up for now.

“Then I’ll send word to the Ministry of the Arcane,” Priscilla offered.

“Thank you. Charnée, could you go to Marquis Claret’s villa and fetch Lady Tilty?”

“Go and call Lady Tilty? Right away!”

"Master Navre, Gark, could you look after Priscilla and Charnée? I'll summon Halphys myself. Lady Ilia, could you prepare the meeting room?"

"Very well. Leave it to me, Lainie."

Once everyone had their tasks, I gave my cheeks a light slap with both hands to wake myself up.

If someone had told me a year ago that I would be dishing out instructions like this, entirely of my own accord, I would have laughed.

But I *had* to act, so I would push forward without delay.

"Well then, I'm counting on you all!"

* * *

Fortunately, Master Lang and the others recognized the importance of this meeting and answered my call in spite of their busy schedules.

Altogether, the participants of the discussion included Lady Ilia and Halphys based here in the capital; Master Navre, Gark, Priscilla, and Charnée—all involved in the construction of the magicology city; Master Lang, Master Marion, and Master Miguel from the Ministry of the Arcane; and of course, Lady Tilty.

After checking to make sure everyone was here, I offered them all a deep bow.

"Thank you for coming, everyone," I said.

"Not a problem, given the situation… Though it feels strange being summoned by you, Miss Lainie," Master Lang said, his usual grim expression relaxing slightly.

Indeed, he and I often crossed paths in the course of our work, but it was rare for us to exchange words while Lady Euphyllia was absent.

"Yes, Lady Euphyllia normally makes most of the arrangements… But she and Lady Anis need time to relax. I decided we need to set the scene so they can act as soon as they're ready to do so," I answered.

"That's fair enough… How are they both?"

"To be perfectly honest, it was a little touch-and-go for a while."

"I see…"

"Lady Anis was one step away from losing control. Can you imagine what might have happened if she went berserk?" I asked.

Master Lang furrowed his brow in alarm.

"That would be a recipe for disaster, now, wouldn't it?" Lady Tilty remarked with a shrug.

"I wouldn't be surprised if she slaughtered every last one of the western nobles," Gark said in a dour murmur.

"…I don't think she's *that* incapable of self-control," Master Navre countered weakly. From his voice, it seemed, however, that he didn't have the strength to argue his point. No doubt he understood that was probably wishful thinking on his part.

"Come on now. Patience is a skill, you know? The real issue is all that deep-seated resentment she's keeping bottled up. Let's be clear: Just because Princess Anisphia is showing restraint doesn't mean it's out of kindness—it's more like a warning. Taking that for granted would be a dangerous move," Master Miguel said in his usual tone.

"…That's true," Master Marion agreed with a solemn nod.

"Right?" Master Miguel continued. "When she *can't* hold back anymore, it means all that pent-up frustration and anger might be unleashed. Worst-case scenario—it could even lead to a civil war."

"With the western provinces? I'd like to think that's overstating things…" Halphys's eyes opened wide.

Master Miguel, however, waved a hand from side to side. "Well, now that the insult has been aired publicly, there's no choice but to address it, right? The real question is how far to stick your hand into this vipers' nest. If Princess Anisphia loses her temper and decides to obliterate them, what next?"

"…We'd have to stop her," Master Lang answered.

"I see. And how are you going to do that?" Master Miguel continued.

"How…? I would warn her, advise her, I suppose…"

"And if she doesn't listen? Just how many people do you think there are in this country who could stop her by force if push came to shove?"

Deathly silence fell over the room.

The only names that came to mind were Lady Euphyllia, Duke Grantz, Queen Emeritus Sylphine, and Lady Lumi.

But according to Lady Lumi, if Lady Anis really went out of control, there might not be *anyone* capable of stopping her…

"The worst part is that Princess Anisphia actually has a good amount of popularity with the people. What if they start sympathizing with her? Especially the common folk, who are still simmering with discontent toward the nobles? Trying to stop them if they go on a rampage after joining sides with her will be quite a challenge—mark my words."

"There's no denying that. I can feel a migraine coming on…," Master Lang murmured as he massaged his furrowed brow.

Master Miguel, however, wasn't finished. "And what if there's another scenario, an even worse potential outcome?"

"…What could be worse than all that?"

"…Princess Anisphia and Queen Euphyllia could just give up on the kingdom altogether and soar off into the horizon."

Once again, the room was enveloped in silence. This time, an ominous foreboding filled the air.

"I'm actually impressed she hasn't turned her back on the country already," Lady Tilty said.

The others turned increasingly morose at this statement.

"Sure, Anis loves the Kingdom of Palettia, but has *it* ever really loved her back?" Lady Tilty continued. "But she kept on trying, didn't she? And then Euphyllia went as far as to become a spirit covenantor. Now look what's happened."

"…You're saying she's compassionate."

"Maybe. They're both hopelessly naive, letting misguided fools take advantage of them. And when they realize what's happened, they're understandably angry. There's nothing any of us can do about it. Frankly, it's not even funny anymore."

"…Lady Euphyllia must be more exhausted that I thought," I said aloud. "After all, with Lady Anis absent for so long working on the magicology city, I should have realized she would become unstable…"

"…Miss Lainie, do you really think there's a chance Princess Anisphia could take Queen Euphyllia and flee the realm?" Master Lang asked with a somber look.

"There's every possibility," I said with a nod.

"…I see…"

"It wouldn't surprise me if Lady Anis feels like she's driven Lady Euphyllia into a corner. If she thought this was all to help realize her own dreams, she might indeed take off with Lady Euphyllia, never to return."

It was a hypothetical situation, but if that were to happen, Lady Ilia and I intended to follow them all the way.

In that respect, I had no particular sense of attachment to the Kingdom of Palettia. Without Lady Anis and the others, there was nothing tying me to it.

I was supporting them because they were both doing their utmost, but if the country itself didn't want them, then I wouldn't stay, either.

"If Queen Euphyllia and Princess Anisphia disappeared, the kingdom would be doomed," Master Miguel remarked.

"Don't scare me like that…," Master Lang answered.

"You've gotta admit, it's definitely possible. It's already strange that Princess Anisphia hasn't cut ties, don't you think? And yet here we are, with fools still insisting her accomplishments are all fictional, and others saying Queen Euphyllia should be nothing more than a symbol of faith. And now Her Majesty has fallen ill. Yes, things could still get worse, but the situation is *bad*—no doubt

about it."

"…Yeah."

"And Queen Euphyllia will step back if the country wants a different future than what she's envisioning. She said so herself. That idiot who ran his mouth this time was a bit too reckless, of course, but you can bet there are others thinking the same way. Give 'em a slap on the wrist, and you'll just have another fool in time. Trust me on that."

"But if we impose too severe a punishment, it might unsettle other members of the nobility…"

Gark spoke up. "…Um, can I ask something?"

"Go ahead."

"What would happen to the nobles who are against Lady Anis if she and Queen Euphyllia gave up their reforms and simply left the country?"

"…Wh-what would happen to them…?"

"I mean, if you said we'd be going back to the days when commoners and even noble families without much skill for magic were always being held back, I'd feel like abandoning the place, too. How many people would actually accept that, though? Wouldn't it just spark another rebellion?"

"…There's no denying that possibility, either," Master Lang said with a sullen nod.

"For better or for worse, Princess Anisphia's changes have already had a significant impact on society. The common folk are particularly grateful for them."

"And don't underestimate how many noble families have her back."

"I know," I agreed. "So why would anyone be so senseless as to pick a fight with her out in the open? And to anger Lady Euphyllia at the same time? I can't begin to understand what they were thinking."

"You mean what the western nobles' game is…? This is just a shot in the dark, but I'm guessing they think we're at an impasse," Master Miguel said.

"An impasse?" I repeated.

He nodded. "Even if the western nobles wanted to upset the balance, they've got their own internal problems keeping them in check. All these different factions and rivalries, everyone trying to maintain the status quo…well, that puts a damper on any plans for change. The second you try to take action, you'll find yourself silenced by all the power struggles and infighting. Trust me, they aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. They may look like they're at odds with each other, but when it comes to protecting their own interests, they don't hold back. Frankly, it's a real pain in the ass. Then you've got the serious ones, like you, Lang, always harping on about matters of faith."

"You think you can make a fool out of me?" Master Lang challenged.

"Ooh, scary, scary," Master Miguel teased. "Well, I guess it makes sense that those who don't fit in there would end up aiming for a lofty position in the Ministry of the Arcane or some other escape. Don't you think so, Marion?"

"Yes. I suppose you could say my own family is like that."

While Master Marion's family, the House of Antti, had land in the west, it identified most strongly with the Ministry of the Arcane.

Master Miguel continued, "Seems like they're tying themselves in knots trying to cover up their corruption, and it's left them unable to commit to anything. Then again, they're so hell-bent on protecting their own hides, they probably won't object too loudly to the new technologies Princess Anisphia is bringing in. They'll pretend to go along with the crown's policies, and when they finally realize the value magical tools bring, they'll be clamoring to make full use of them."

"But didn't that idiot say Lady Anis's achievements were all fake?" Master Lang asked.

"Well, there's no defending idiocy. The problem is more where and when he said it." The next moment, Master Miguel's carefree attitude sharpened noticeably. "The corruption in the western provinces may run deeper than we thought. This could be the result of legitimate grievances getting squashed underfoot before they could properly take root. After all, despite their inner conflicts, the nobility will close ranks and fight as one to resist any outside

intervention. They're not the kind of people you want to mess with."

"Wouldn't it be easier just to blow the whole thing up and get rid of them all?" Gark muttered in annoyance.

"It isn't that simple," Charnée answered with a forced smile.

At this, Gark's lips came together in a dissatisfied pout. "But what's so complicated? Can't we keep the good and get rid of the bad? The guy who picked this fight in the first place is the one at fault."

"That's true enough. But here's the problem—if the punishment goes too far, we risk spreading unrest among the other western nobles. Ultimately, it could feed into their distrust of the royal family. If that happened, it'd be hard to steer the kingdom's policies in the west. There's always the option of trying to rule by force instead…"

"Neither Lady Anis nor Lady Euphyllia wants to go that far," I pointed out.

"If they were going to rule by diktat, there would already have been uprisings," Lady Tilty added.

The others nodded along in tacit agreement.

"I mean, those western nobles do realize they're hurting themselves, right?" Gark said. "So why are they trying to provoke a response? Are they really that stupid?"

"Maybe because they can't let go of past glory?" Priscilla suggested. "Perhaps they don't have anything else to be proud of? That would explain their obsession with faith, no?"

"…Hey, Priscilla…?"

"Hmm? Why the glum look, Master Navre?"

"Could you try being a bit more diplomatic for once?"

"I don't believe I'm mistaken. Magicology and magical tools are going to drastically change the way magic is practiced from here on out. When that happens, it's inevitable that traditional mages will decline in value. I'd say that's a foregone conclusion."

The room responded to Priscilla's remarks with forced smiles and awkward looks. Master Lang was wearing a noticeable grimace.

Priscilla was right, and we all knew it—although she could have found a more tactful phrasing.

"Wouldn't they be better off befriending Princess Anisphia and using her to their own advantage? Why make an enemy out of her unnecessarily? They *had* to have considered that, right?" she added.

"…I see your point," Master Navre murmured.

I had pondered that question myself, but it wasn't the sort of conundrum that could be solved alone. I caught myself breathing a tired sigh.

"Now that I'm so much closer to political affairs, I've come to understand just how difficult His Former Majesty's life must have been," I observed.

"…You mean King Emeritus Orphans?"

"His Former Majesty ascended to the throne in the midst of a coup attempt. I've heard that he prioritized rebuilding the kingdom in order to maintain its military strength and that he struggled to balance the interests of the different noble factions. There were so many challenges just in the western provinces alone. It must have been difficult for him…"

Even now, there were those who disparaged the former king as an unremarkable ruler devoid of elegance or charm.

I, however, was convinced—if he hadn't laid the groundwork for its current relative stability, the realm would have fallen into chaos long ago.

"Lady Euphyllia and Lady Anis are striving to follow in His Former Majesty's footsteps. However they choose to go about it, they're capable of uniting the kingdom," I said.

Neither of them, however, was interested in pushing their reforms through by force.

I considered that an admirable sentiment—but at the same time, they were holding themselves back a little too much, if you asked me. They could afford to be a little more selfish.

"I don't want them to have to carry the kingdom on their shoulders like human pillars. One day, they *will* leave it. They've already agreed they have to."

"…Miss Lainie, you're saying they'll leave the Kingdom of Palettia? Even if their reforms are a success?" Master Lang asked.

"Yes, that's right. Once they decide they don't need to take charge themselves, I suspect. This country is a place for humans to live, they said. It isn't meant for beings who have strayed from their humanity."

"…So it will be the end of the royal line?" he murmured, his voice betraying a tangled mix of emotions. "*Human pillars…* That is a troubling way of putting it. The aristocracy has a responsibility to protect and lead. The same goes for our royal family. That's why they're expected to fulfill their duties as a matter of course. I still don't think it's wrong for those with the right skills and abilities to take on greater responsibilities, but if they aren't blessed with the aptitudes required to fulfill the duties they already have…well, maybe it wouldn't be surprising if they decided to abandon it all."

"Lady Anis isn't planning on abandoning anyone. Though she does want to step back when the time comes," I said.

"I guess that's what makes me so nervous. It's a lot to carry, the burden of changing an entire nation. I can see what Princess Anisphia is trying to nurture. By bestowing magic on everyone, she wants to make sure no one's life is decided for them merely by their social standing. It's a lofty ideal. But there's no guarantee she'll be successful, so it's natural to be concerned…"

"But Lady Anis and Lady Euphyllia are doing everything in their power to make it a reality."

"I know… I know… It is a challenge keeping up, however."

"What's that, Lang? Not up to the challenge?" Master Miguel quipped.

"How dare you, Miguel? If I was scared, I might as well resign my position here and now. Do you think I'd run away from an opportunity to etch my name into history? *That* would be an act of cowardice," Master Lang rebuffed him with a stern frown. "I'm not going to let my run end in disappointment. I won't allow it. If our two leaders want to leave us in the future, then it's my duty as

their subject to fulfill their wishes."

"I also want to make sure they can both leave one day feeling they've accomplished their tasks. If I'm to help them, I can't keep relying on them forever," I added, speaking up with determination.

The others all nodded along in firm agreement.

"For now, let's put together a basic plan about how we could handle the western nobles," I suggested. "We need to ensure that we can support Lady Euphyllia and Lady Anis no matter what decision they make."

"Yes, I agree. Let's consider a range of responses that would both align with their wishes and benefit the realm as a whole. That's our duty," Master Lang added with a firm nod.

Again, the others nodded in agreement.

Given their powers and skills, I understood the temptation to rely on Lady Euphyllia's and Lady Anis's personal judgment.

But I knew also that they didn't want us to force them to take the reins. What they really wanted was to enable others to stand up and push forward by themselves.

So I would do precisely that, in order to fulfill *my* dream.

I prayed the two of them would take some time off, even if just a little. After all, we were here to help them now.

This was our moment to give everything we had for the cause. And so I took a deep breath and lightly patted my cheeks to reenergize myself. Yes, it was time to go all out!

CHAPTER 4
The Ideal Ruler

"Ngh..."

Ever so slowly, my shallowly submerged consciousness began to resurface. I hadn't fallen completely asleep, but at least I had been able to surrender myself to a state of light drowsiness.

I probably had Anis to thank for that. She had woken me up moving around in her sleep, but her presence by my side had unmistakably helped put my mind at ease.

"...I made you cry, didn't I?" I murmured.

Noticing that the corners of her eyes were still wet with tears, I reached out to gently wipe them away.

Following that quarrel, the two of us had fallen asleep crying in each other's arms. I remembered watching her doze off, but everything after that was a blur.

"...It isn't easy bringing someone back to their senses, is it?"

I felt as though I had taken something important for granted, and it was only natural I had ended up losing it. Attempting to reintroduce it was like taking a foreign substance into your body and trying to keep it down.

No matter how hard I tried, I doubted I could swallow this all on my own, but with Anis here, it settled naturally. It was embarrassing to admit, even to myself.

I ran my fingers across her cheeks—and at that moment, she flinched, her eyes opening ever so slightly.

"...Ngh."

"Did I wake you, Anis?"

"…Euphie."

"Yes, it's me."

"…You haven't slept."

"I was able to sleep some."

"Liar."

Maybe because she was still sleepy, Anis's lips came together in a displeased pout—and I leaned in to give her a soft peck.

Then, as if pleading for me to go on, she reached out. We kissed again and again, our chests filling with warmth.

All I wanted was for her to understand how much I loved her. The next moment, she inserted a hand between us, pushing me back. It felt like a rejection. Her warmth slowly ebbed away.

"…Enough already," she said.

"I want to keep going!"

"No!" She blushed, burying her face in her pillow.

Seriously, that behavior only made her more irresistible.

Seeing that her face was hidden, I kissed her hair instead, and the touch filled me to the core with contentment.

Ah, yes. I still needed her by my side after all.

Anis looked up from her pillow. "…Does that make you feel better?"

"Yes. Thank you. What about you, Anis?"

"…Mm-hmm."

On hearing my answer, she sat up straight and reached out with both hands, like a child begging to be picked up. It was a strike straight into my heart.

Ugh. I had to grit my teeth to keep myself from growling out loud as I settled into her arms.

She embraced me in an all-encompassing hug, the two of us so close that we could hear each other's hearts beating. Like that, we passed the time peacefully

to the comforting sound of our breaths intermingling.

I wished I could just let go and melt away. It was as if someone had pulled the plug on me, as if my energies were slowly draining away.

Ah. Yes, this was the person I had been longing for. My thirst was quenched, and I was deeply satisfied. I didn't need anything else today…

"You must be tired, Euphie…"

"…Mm-hmm."

"…Are you going to sleep?"

"Not quite…"

"…Right."

We leaned into each other, the two of us weak. Even our words seemed to be sapped of energy.

If only we could melt together completely.

At that moment, however, a sound rang out.

Grrrgl.

It was Anis's stomach, growling with hunger. A second later, she jumped to her feet and pried me away.

I wasn't at all happy to lose her warmth so suddenly, but her adorable blush as she averted her gaze was enough to make me forget my annoyance.

"…It's morning," she pointed out.

"You can pretend you didn't hear it."

"I did, though. Besides, I heard you didn't eat anything last night."

"Ack…!"

Anis glared down at her belly—a sight I couldn't help but find endearing.

"Shall we go and get breakfast?" I asked.

"…Has your appetite come back?" She peered into my face with a worried frown.

Apologetic, I shook my head. Frankly, the mere thought of food left me feeling queasy. It was probably fair to say I was sick to death of food.

Anis quietly deflated. It was such a painful sight that I found myself swallowing a sigh.

"But maybe if I go with you, I'll be able to eat something," I suggested.

"...Really?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go grab a bite to eat! Come on, Euphie!" she cried out, suddenly bursting with energy.

I was glad to see that she was feeling better. I knew I wouldn't be able to stomach much, but the important thing here was to give her a little peace of mind.

I was just about to call out to the maid when, with perfect timing, a knock sounded at the door. Anis and I looked at each other.

"Lady Anisphia, Lady Euphyllia. Are you awake?"

"Ilia? Is something wrong?"

Yes, it was Ilia. No sooner had Anis answered her than she stepped into the room with a polite bow.

"My apologies for bothering you both, but we've received a message from His Former Majesty..."

"From Father-in-law?"

"Yes. If you're feeling well enough, he would like you to come up to the castle as soon as possible...," Ilia said, looking my way with worry.

Again, I exchanged glances with Anis.

It sounded like something *had* happened if he wanted to see me as soon as possible...

"Are you up to it, Euphie?" Anis asked.

"Yes, I'm okay. It must be important, so let's go up to the castle. Ilia, could

you tell him we'll be there once we've finished breakfast?"

"Very well. I will let him know."

I hoped a new problem hadn't arisen, but it was hard to tell.

Before I knew it, I was breathing heavy sighs all over again.

* * *

After breakfast, we went up to the castle. Entering my office, I found my parents-in-law waiting for us.

I felt guilty for dragging these two back into public service to deputize for me, yet it was Father-in-law who flashed me an apologetic smile as he stood up from his seat.

"Euphyllia," he said, resting a hand on my shoulder sympathetically. "I'm sorry for calling you here while you're unwell. It was nice of you to come, too, Anis."

"Are you feeling all right, Euphyllia? You aren't pushing yourself too hard, are you?" Mother-in-law asked.

"I am all right. I don't mind. Was there something I can help you with?"

"Hmm. Well, that's the thing…," Father-in-law began. "As it happens, Marquis Sienna has requested an audience with you."

"*What?*" Anis blurted out, her voice filled with rage.

The former king glanced across at her with a startled look. Mother-in-law rested a hand on her forehead as if she had a headache, though she didn't voice any complaints out loud.

Meanwhile, Anis's eyes narrowed into an unsettling squint. "Marquis Sienna —he's one of the leaders among the western nobles, right? And he wants an audience *now*? Don't tell me he wants to apologize?"

"That's within the realm of possibility," Father-in-law answered.

"Don't tell me he wants a reduced sentence?"

"That's also quite possible."

"Father!" Anis growled. I briefly worried she might bite the former king's head off.

At that moment, my mother-in-law moved to intervene—but just before she could raise her voice, Anis calmed herself and took a deep breath, though she was still scowling in dissatisfaction.

Once she had her temper under control, Father-in-law continued, "It seems Marquis Sienna is aware of your return, Anis. He also wishes to discuss the affront made to you."

"He wants *my* forgiveness now?" she declared menacingly, leaving little doubt she had no intention of accepting any apology.

At this, Father-in-law knitted his brow. He was at his wit's end.

"I can accept it to some extent, people talking bad about me," Anis continued.

"Anis."

"But those western morons disrespected Euphie! And because of that, her health has gone downhill!"

"Calm down, Anis."

"Mother!"

"I told you to calm down!"

Mother-in-law admonished her twice, but Anis's anger wasn't easily cooled.

Mother and daughter glared across at each other, but Anis was the first to relent, lowering her head as guilt washed over her.

The former queen stared at her with a pained look, before letting out a heavy sigh. "I understand your feelings all too well. And I'm very familiar with how difficult it is to keep your cool when told to back down."

"...I know."

"You've always tried to stifle your feelings when people mistreat you... I'm sorry. I feel so pathetic, burdening you like this."

Anis picked her head up and quickly cut in. "It isn't *your* fault, Mother..."

Mother-in-law, however, gave her head a quiet shake. "It isn't so easy, given my position. As former queen and as your mother."

Anis bit her lip and stared down at her feet, unable to respond.

Her mother walked over to her, patting her softly on the shoulders. “I didn’t scold you just now with the intention of stopping you. All I’m saying is you need to calm down first, or you’ll end up making mistakes. Do you understand?”

“Huh?”

“If you’re going to do it, be relentless. You can’t afford any half measures,” Mother-in-law said, holding her by the shoulders and giving a determined nod.

If I wasn’t mistaken, the strength emanating from her rivaled Anis’s own fury.

I watched as Anis gulped. Yes, there could be no mistaking it—these two really were parent and child.

“Orphans and I are both livid at the situation,” Mother-in-law said. “If Marquis Sienna wants to apologize or beg for leniency, *I*, for one, wouldn’t accept it.”

“But he requested this audience in advance of his departure,” Father-in-law added. “That being the case, we also need to agree on a stance toward the western regions. Do you understand, Anis? If you lose your temper with him, it could complicate the situation even further. The marquis is a seasoned and cunning fellow. Be careful.”

“Ugh…”

“Euphyllia? Shall we proceed with the understanding you’ll grant him an audience?”

“…Very well. I’ll accept.”

“Euphie!”

“It would be better for all of us to get this over with sooner rather than later.”

I appreciated Anis’s concern, but I did want to move this matter along. I didn’t think it was wise to leave the problem of the western regions the way it was, and if we were going to act, the sooner the better.

“I’d like to coordinate my response to some extent with Lang and the others before the audience…,” I began.

“About that…” Father-in-law trailed off.

“There’s no need, Lady Euphyllia!”

“…Lainie?”

Yes, Lainie had appeared with impeccable timing.

I glanced across at Father-in-law, who for some reason looked like he was fighting to hold back laughter. What on earth was going on?

“I didn’t expect them to make the first move, but there’s no need to worry,” Lainie continued. “We’ve already put together several plans on how to deal with the western nobles. We’ve listed the details in these documents.”

“…You made these, Lainie?”

“With Master Lang and the others so that you could have them for reference right away.”

I skimmed over the documents she handed me, impressed by just how well they were thought through.

Was Lainie really responsible for all this? I had certainly asked her to produce documents and reports in the past, but this was entirely on her own initiative.

When did she learn to do all this herself? I could hardly believe my eyes.

“The final decision is yours to make, Lady Euphyllia, but we can outline various options available to you. After all, we can’t keep making you do everything by yourself.”

“…I’m amazed you compiled so many options in such a short time.”

“Masters Lang, Miguel, and Marion did the majority of the work. Master Navre and Priscilla helped a lot, too.”

“Navre did?”

“He said he simply couldn’t endure that you had been subjected to ridicule.”

Anis’s eyes widened in surprise. Lainie, meanwhile, flashed her a mischievous grin.

I felt myself swelling with pride. At the same time, however, there was work I had to do. It seemed I had put a lot of pressure on everyone…

"Thank you, Lainie. Though this should have been my job under normal circumstances…"

"Don't say that. Didn't I tell you earlier? We can't keep relying on you to do everything forever."

"But…"

"We want to support you, Lady Euphyllia. Please don't say anything about troubling us. If anything, please use us more. We would gladly work to lighten your burden." Her radiant smile as she spoke put my heart at ease.

Ah… All that wishful thinking about relying on others more was surprisingly difficult to put into practice. Instead of feeling guilty at my own inaction, I should have been appreciating the fact that they had stepped in to help.

"Besides, I'm very upset at those western nobles and that attitude they took with you. Since they caused this commotion, we should move ahead to respond quickly. So please, get back at them for us, too!"

"…I see. Thank you, Lainie. You stepped up to the task and did a remarkable job."

At this, Lainie broke into another dazzling smile.

Her newfound confidence made me feel as though I really could rely on her. I found myself smiling back at her.

"Let's hammer out the details, then. Seeing as you've put in all this effort, I owe it to you to finish it properly," I declared, my voice filled with greater strength than ever before.

* * *

After I'd perused the documents Lainie had put together and considered various responses and their expected outcomes, it was time for my audience with Marquis Sienna. With me were Anis, Father-in-law, Mother-in-law, and Lainie.

Once again, I was sitting across from Marquis Sienna, but he was not nearly so arrogant this time.

In fact, I was a little concerned about his condition. I hoped he hadn't fallen ill

due to being kept in the royal palace for so long…

"Marquis Sienna. Please, raise your head," I called out.

The marquis, however, continued to slump forward as he knelt before me.

"First, I must apologize to Your Majesty and Princess Anisphia for our disrespect toward you both," he said. "I'm truly sorry. As a representative of the western nobles, I'm deeply ashamed."

I didn't sense any ulterior motives in his apology. In fact, he came across as rather sincere.

I decided to take a wait-and-see approach.

Anis, however, responded in a cold, emotionless voice, "I'll decide whether or not to accept your apology *after* this meeting. Raise your head, Marquis Sienna."

When he neither spoke nor moved, Anis pressed harder. "Didn't you hear me? I said look up, Marquis Sienna. We can't talk if you won't even look at us."

"…As you wish." The marquis relented, slowly doing as she instructed. His expression was remarkably calm. He didn't seem in the least bit flustered. No—on the contrary, he was so quiet, he came across as somewhat eerie.

But, I told myself, this conversation wouldn't go anywhere if I didn't take the lead.

"Then may I ask why you requested this audience, Marquis Sienna?" I began.

"Indeed. What manner of action are Your Majesty and Princess Anisphia planning to take regarding this matter, if I might be so bold as to inquire? I wished to speak with you both in the hopes of alleviating my concerns."

"My personal view is that we could replace every last one of you western nobles. But I don't speak for Euphie," Anis declared in a chilling, indifferent voice.

Marquis Sienna didn't flinch, but I didn't fail to notice both Lainie and Father-in-law looking visibly nervous.

"You've gone too far," Anis continued. "Accusations of illegal trade, insults

directed at the royal family, and a general disregard for our laws. Not to mention your failure to respect the crown. And not only do your people air their accusations with no regard to the time or place, they demand an extraordinary response with no appreciation for the consequences. If that isn't negligence on your part, what is it?"

"…"

"Can you offer any other explanation, Marquis Sienna?"

"…No, I'm afraid not."

"…You can't?" Anis asked, evidently not having expected this response.

I wasn't about to let it show, but I was equally confused. I had assumed the marquis asked for this meeting in order to beg forgiveness on behalf of his peers…

But if that wasn't it, what on earth *was* his objective here?

"Once investigated, I'm sure the many sins and wrongdoings of my fellow nobles will be brought to light," he said at last. "I would be more than willing to cooperate and ask only that I be justly judged. I am ready to face whatever punishment you see fit."

"…You aren't going to plead your case or submit a defense?" Anis asked.

"I have no wish to oppose the royal family at this point."

"…You asked to see us just to say that? Why?"

"Our crimes are beyond dispute. That being the case, I ask only that they be judged fairly. Some of us may be deserving of death, but others were unaware of their sins, or were coerced to take part against their will. I humbly ask that mercy be shown where it is warranted," Marquis Sienna declared with another deep bow.

With her momentum thrown, Anis's anger gave way to annoyance and consternation.

She wasn't the only one left confused—the rest of us, I sensed, shared that sentiment.

"I'm afraid I don't understand why you're acting this way all of a sudden, Marquis Sienna," I said. "I already intend to judge anyone facing accusations impartially. However, if you're willing to accept punishment, why didn't you turn yourself in sooner? Your behavior doesn't match your words."

At this, the marquis slowly raised his head.

He seemed utterly exhausted.

After a short moment, he forced a weak smile. "If that is how you feel, then I take it as a sign I did my best despite my limited abilities."

"…What do you mean?"

"Your Majesty. If I had tried to turn myself in, I would have been assassinated before I could ever reveal what I know."

"…Assassinated?"

"The western provinces have stubbornly rejected any interference from the crown and have united as one against outside threats. This, however, was all an effort to cover up our own sins—and our recent betrayal. Many of us have been willing to go to any lengths necessary to achieve their goals."

"…But that would be treason," Anis pointed out accusingly.

Marquis Sienna shook his head. "Indeed. But it was never our goal to oppose the crown. Nonetheless, it's also true that some of our members never intended to abide by your laws, so I know this may sound like a weak excuse…"

"It sounds ridiculous," Anis answered. "You don't want your crimes unmasked, you want to avoid royal interference, and you also don't want to be branded traitors. Who's supposed to buy that story?"

"It isn't very plausible, I admit. But we in the west had little choice. It's all the result of my own incompetence. I'm the most culpable in this matter."

"…You never had any real intention of uncovering the misconduct yourselves?"

"At this point, it would be impossible on our own. Everyone is involved to some extent, and everyone understood that if our wrongdoings came to light, it would be fatal to all of us. We all know each other's weaknesses; this is how we

keep one another in check. That's the reality for us in the west."

Anis was growing more and more displeased by this explanation, her gaze hardening. Still, she didn't speak up—so I asked the question on all our minds.

"You say the truth is deserving of punishment? And that the western nobles are collectively responsible for covering it up?"

"Yes."

"…Why come forward now, Marquis Sienna? Why not say something sooner?" Father-in-law interrupted. I heard pain in his voice.

Marquis Sienna looked up, his eyes narrowing. There was no hostility in them, but rather a sense of calm.

I suspected Father-in-law was the most bewildered of all by what we had heard today.

"King Orphans, by the time you took control of the country after your coronation, the western provinces had already reached a point of no return. Back then, the country was still in disarray. It could be argued that Your Majesty's peaceful, non-authoritarian rule allowed corruption to thrive."

"Are you blaming my father for your own dishonesty?" Anis demanded.

"No. We were without shame, that's all. And of course, King Orphans didn't have the time or the resources to spare on us back then. If he had realized what was happening among our lords, he might have pushed us further. We don't want to see the realm any more divided. On top of that, if we sought help, the west's punishment might have been less severe than was warranted. That would not be justifiable." Marquis Sienna sighed, shaking his head. "But the situation changed when Queen Euphyllia acceded to the throne."

"How so?" I asked.

"Your and Princess Anisphia's achievements have been so spectacular, it's little wonder those who have high expectations for you both have been dazzled by their brilliance…"

"Expectations? I thought your people looked down on me as a worthless fraud?" Anis fired back.

"Not everyone feels the same way. Count Leghorn, for one, is far too fervent in his spiritualist devotion. I can understand how he feels, to some extent, but the more you chase after purity and righteousness in our lands, the more you end up poisoning yourself as a result…"

"…And so?" Anis demanded, her anger bubbling to the surface. Her eyes were deadly sharp as she glared at Marquis Sienna.

"Poisoning yourself? Is that what you call it, being unable to do anything? Because you were born into that mess of yours? Is that the conclusion you've drawn from it all? It isn't even funny. And *that's* the kind of person making fun of me? No, this isn't amusing in the slightest."

"…I can offer no excuse," Marquis Sienna answered, lowering his head in the face of Anis's anger.

Anis did not appreciate this response. "Don't be stupid!" she snarled. "Do you know how much I've suffered?! You nobles are all the same! Always looking down your noses at people just because they can't use magic! What have *you lot* accomplished with all your powers?! You mock me, you deny my achievements—but what do you all have to show for yourselves?! Nothing!"

I didn't fail to notice both Father-in-law and Mother-in-law watching this with visible apprehension.

After that outburst, Anis paused to catch her breath in an effort to calm her emotions. Silence filled the air, except for her heavy breathing.

"…Why are you all such a disappointment? Why did I let Euphie take on the responsibility of managing this country? Maybe I should have wiped out every noble and magic user instead?"

"Anis…"

"Do you know how much my parents suffered to protect this country?! Or Allie?! All because you're so obsessed with faith, you can't even see the people themselves! Why can't you just strip away the miracle of magic and see people for who they are?! How much do you have to mock me to feel good about yourselves?!"

"Anis! That's enough!" I called out, grabbing her by the shoulders.

"…!"

I pulled her close, patting her on the back to calm her down.

Anis bit her lip and all but fell into my arms with a shudder.

…I sensed she had been holding this in for a long time.

It was a cry of heartbreaking sorrow. And I wasn't the only one who felt that way—no one here would fail to recognize the extent of her pain and suffering.

I broke the silence to speak in her defense. "Marquis Sienna, I understand your feelings and the situation in the west. However, as a lord of the Kingdom of Palettia, your past weakness is itself a sin. I cannot overlook it."

"…I'm deserving of whatever punishment you see fit."

"…What do you seek from this audience? Judgment?"

I couldn't understand the motives behind his actions.

At that moment, Marquis Sienna glanced over at me. Something about his gaze seemed almost pleading, and I frowned.

He was visibly unwell. He must have known he couldn't hide it, as he quickly averted his gaze.

"I had to see for myself to be sure," he murmured.

"See what?" I asked.

"Whether you're the lord we've been waiting for. Someone capable of carrying out righteous governance."

There was a desperate plea in his voice, a cry for help that I couldn't ignore.

"I'm a fool. Despite my status, I allowed the western nobility to succumb to corruption. But I'm still a noble of the Kingdom of Palettia. Though I had to yield to the situation I found myself in, I never abandoned my pride." The marquis's voice gradually regained its strength as the force of his emotions shone through.

What I sensed welling up inside him was intense anger, maybe even resentment. But it gave way quickly, like a doused flame. It had flared for a brief moment, but it didn't last. Within seconds, he was a tired old man again.

“I believed my only option was to wait for the day when a worthy ruler, one who truly cared for the realm, rose up to lead… I mean no offense, but when I heard that Princess Anisphia couldn’t use magic and that Lord Algard was far from outstanding in ability, I despaired. There was no hope, I thought…”

“Marquis Sienna…”

His voice was filled with regret, a sincere expression of apology.

To be honest, his words struck me as selfish. Yet I wasn’t angry with him. What I felt was closer to pity.

“I hoped someone would be able to judge me fairly before the end of my days. And then you took the throne, Queen Euphyllia…but it seemed you weren’t the ruler I had long been hoping for…”

“She wasn’t…?” Anis asked, puzzled.

“What I wanted was the wise old leadership that the Kingdom of Palettia had enjoyed in ages past. Over these past few years, I’ve realized that dream is beyond my reach.” Marquis Sienna breathed a deep sigh, then slowly shook his head. “Without a doubt, you are both right. It’s natural to seek a new future rather than to cling to the past. You may not be the ruler I wanted, but you are the queen the people wanted. If I can’t accept that, I am nothing more than an old malcontent.”

“…”

“I’ve often wondered—why didn’t King Orphans have the same talents Queen Sylphine and Duke Magenta did? Why wasn’t Prince Algard born with greater abilities? Why couldn’t Queen Euphyllia and Princess Anisphia be one and the same…?” the marquis said, lamenting circumstances he had no control over.

I couldn’t bring myself to feel angry at him, only sorry for him.

Unable to change his own unfortunate circumstances, he had waited for someone else to appear to save him. Now, he mourned the fact those who rose to power lacked the ability to do so.

“If you had found a king just like you wanted, do you think he would have created an ideal kingdom?” I asked.

"…Is there a difference between that and the one you envision, Your Majesty?"

"Yes," I answered firmly.

What Marquis Sienna wanted, or so it seemed to me, was the sort of country ruled over by the Kingdom of Palettia's first king. Lumi had rejected his vision and had entered into her spirit covenant to put an end to it.

Magic was a precious gift bestowed on us by the spirits. But if the country itself became dependent on that power, it would soon lead to a warped society.

Could one use magic or not? Were they high-or lowborn? Such a system created difference, and that led to division. My beloved Anis would end up suffering in that kind of world.

That realization was where my own wish came from and why I couldn't give it up.

"What I hope for isn't a world where people wait to be saved, but one where we can reach out to save those who need it. Magic is a precious gift given to us by the spirits, but it can only help us so much. What you're describing is the old Kingdom of Palettia."

"…Yes. I see that now."

"I want to empower people, be they aristocrats or commoners, to reach for their dreams. This may render some things obsolete. And there will be times when change is inevitable."

I paused there, glancing toward Anis. She continued to watch the marquis with an expression that could have been either angry or sad.

Marquis Sienna's wish was selfish, as I was sure even he recognized. Still, he refused to change; he didn't have the strength to change. For that reason, he could perhaps be described as a tragic figure.

"I want to create a country where people can choose their own path," I continued.

Just as Anis had gritted her teeth despite all adversity and continued to forge ahead—so that if others reached out, they, too, could grasp at hope. So that

people didn't have to be defined by their birth.

Marquis Sienna looked up at the ceiling, then closed his eyes and let out a slow breath.

After a long moment, he lowered his gaze to face me.

Now, his eyes were gentle, as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"I realize now just how much I lack both talent and spirit. Yes, you aren't the ruler I dreamed of."

"Marquis Sienna…"

"…But I'm glad you're the one who will give us justice."

Then he whispered, "Now it can finally end."

His was a selfish wish to the end. But instead of anger, a hollow sadness filled my heart.

He hadn't found the salvation he had always hoped for, but he may have been saved anyway by letting go of his former dream.

Yes. If anything had redeemed this situation, that was it.

CHAPTER 5
Passing Judgment

I was sitting on the throne in the audience chamber a few days after my meeting with Marquis Sienna, staring down at the figures kneeling before me—the western nobles who had journeyed to the royal capital. At the head of the group was the marquis himself, frozen in a reverent bow.

Next to me were Anis, Father-in-law, Mother-in-law, Lang, Marion, and Miguel, while Navre and Gark were among the knights standing guard.

Everyone's cold gazes were fixed on the western nobles. They must have sensed the hostility, as they seemed fidgety and unsettled.

"...Rise," I called out.

The nobles raised their heads. Some turned deathly pale, while others let their attention wander, unfocused. And then there were those glowering at Anis, next to me. A wide range of emotions was on display.

Today, they would each be confronted with their crimes, and I would pronounce punishment.

"You have been charged with the following crimes. First, disrespecting the royal family. Second, engaging in the importation and sale of illegal goods. And third, falsifying your reports to the crown. The first was committed in front of my very eyes, before several witnesses, so there is no need for further evidence. As for the importation and sale of illegal goods and your false reporting..."

"D-do you actually have any proof?!"

"That was just Count Leghorn letting his imagination run wild!"

"We would never break Your Majesty's laws!"

One after another, the western nobles began to clamor.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Anis knitting her brow in disapproval, while I breathed an annoyed sigh.

"Silence," I ordered. "We have been investigating these irregularities for quite some time. Furthermore, we've received testimony from a reliable source corroborating what we've learned."

"What?!"

"Wh-where in the world are you getting this information?! It must be a conspiracy hoping to drive a wedge between us and the crown! I doubt the reliability of this so-called testimony!"

"Our information comes directly from Marquis Sienna," I declared, sending the western nobility into an immediate stir.

The marquis himself continued to kneel before me, betraying no sign of agitation.

After our audience, Marquis Sienna had presented us with extensive evidence of criminal wrongdoing, information that aligned with the details we had uncovered ourselves. We had concluded there was no mistake.

The marquis wished for the crimes of the western nobles, himself included, to be fairly judged. I could sense his sincerity when he said he didn't want me to overlook his region's corruption.

Sadly, he didn't have the strength or the influence to correct the situation in the west himself. It was for that reason he supplied us with all this evidence in the hope we would remove the poison and restore order.

I didn't particularly like it, but he hadn't come forward with this information earlier because he had been trying to gauge my character.

In any event, the important thing today was to decide what to do with the western regions in the future.

"I-impossible...!"

"Marquis Sienna would never—"

"It's true," the marquis himself interrupted, and his fellow nobles turned on him like a pack of wolves.

“What’s the meaning of this, Marquis Sienna?!”

“It couldn’t be helped. The crown accused me of wrongdoing, and when asked if I had any evidence, I confessed everything I knew.”

“Y-you traitor!”

Some of the western nobles hung their heads in resignation, others glanced about as if searching for an opportunity, while yet others glared over at Marquis Sienna. They looked as though they might pounce on him at any moment.

It was an ugly spectacle. Marquis Sienna, still quietly awaiting his fate, was taking this better than the rest of them.

“It seems you’ve been following your own whims, secure in the belief your actions hadn’t reached the crown’s ears,” I said.

“…!”

“How do you intend to make recompense for your crimes?”

At this question, the western nobles froze in place. None of them, however, ventured to speak up. They merely watched one another, waiting for someone else to speak, or else stared back at me pleadingly…

All I could do was sigh.

Anis’s expression was blank, as if her emotions had deserted her. “Euphie,” she said.

“Yes? What is it, Anis?”

“It seems this lot can’t bring themselves to respond. So how about I make them my own offer?”

“Very well. How do you think they should be punished?”

“These are serious crimes… I think they and their families should be blotted out… We could exterminate the lot of them and start over with a clean slate,” she said in no uncertain terms—in other words, she was suggesting putting them and their families to death.

It was an extreme suggestion, and the western nobles spun around to face her in disbelief.

The look that Anis gave them in turn was frigid, as if she were looking at trash. Perhaps realizing that she was being perfectly serious, the nobles broke into a panic.

"E-exterminate us…?!"

"Princess Anisphia, please, show mercy!"

"Oh, so you can speak? Then why didn't you answer Euphie's question?" she challenged.

"I—I…!"

"I can only assume you're *still* treating the crown with contempt. Or are you only interested in protecting your own hides?" Anis demanded.

Again, the nobles fell into a commotion, albeit a quiet one.

Was this the only response they were capable of? I wished they would at least pretend to be willing to mend their ways…

It was Marquis Sienna who spoke up, addressing his fellow nobles in rebuke. "Princess Anisphia is right. Our crimes are so great that exterminating our bloodlines is entirely justifiable."

"Marquis Sienna! Y-you backstabbing snake!"

"No way! You're selling us out to save your own skin?!"

"You fools! I'm fully aware of my shame! I don't seek forgiveness! If Her Majesty decides my death is warranted, then I will accept my fate with grace!" the marquis admonished his fellow nobles, his commanding voice filled with unyielding vigor.

The nobles trembled in fear, but a few still raised their voices in defiance.

"C-coward! You'd drag us all down with you?! You've gone along with us for years!"

"I won't deny it. There's nothing to be gained by saying it was never my intention. I've always opposed the crown's interference in our lands, deceiving the crown ostensibly to protect our own. Others took advantage of that lack of oversight to engage in illegal activities, and they always escaped justice."

"Right! And that's *your* crime, Sienna!"

"…You lot can't talk after embezzling so much from the kingdom's defense budget!" Anis interjected with deadly pressure.

The nobles were so terrified by this sudden attack that the marquis himself broke out into a cold sweat, even though he was not directly involved in the misappropriation of funds.

No doubt they had never seen Anis in a rage before and had no idea how to respond.

"Marquis Sienna is far from innocent, but *you're* the ones who pushed him into a corner and practically forced him to join your crimes. No?" Anis demanded.

"I-it isn't like that…!"

"Th-this is all just a misunderstanding…!"

As Lainie pulled out a stack of papers, Anis went on. "You've diverted funds meant to maintain various knightly orders, involved yourselves in illegal trade, and compelled others to join in as your accomplices. You're a cunning, ruthless lot. So long as no one exposed you, you could control the western regions like they were your own little kingdoms. If you need proof of these accusations, it's all outlined in these documents."

That was enough to silence the nobles, leaving them hanging their heads. They understood that, faced with documented evidence, they would have no choice but to admit their guilt.

Now that the hearing had reached this point, there was no turning back.

"Is this the true state of affairs in the west? It's disgusting… What do you think, Euphie?" Anis asked.

"It is indeed disappointing…"

"Please, forgive us, Queen Euphyllia!"

"Show mercy, I beg of you!"

"We'll mend our ways! We'll pledge our everlasting loyalty!"

One after the other, the nobles begged for forgiveness. Marquis Sienna, I noticed, cast his gaze to the ground with visible disappointment.

I was so stunned that I had to pause for a moment before speaking up.

"Words alone are meaningless," I said at last. "Your actions thus far have lost you the crown's trust."

"B-but how will you defend the western border without us?!" one noble shouted, all but sending saliva flying across the room.

His companions scrambled to join in.

"Th-that's right! Without us, the kingdom won't be able to muster a proper defense! Just think how the neighboring countries might react!"

"We have connections in foreign lands! It would be a detriment to the nation to throw them all away!"

…Honestly, listening to their complaints was giving me a headache. Just how shallow could they be? Didn't they have any pride as nobles?

Some of those looking on, I noticed, could no longer hide their disgust.

"Are we to interpret that as a threat against the crown?" Anis asked.

"What?! A threat?!"

"Wh-why would you twist our words like that…?!"

"How am I twisting anything?" Anis continued. "You're implying, in front of your queen, that the country would be in danger without you. How ridiculous. That's another issue, your lack of loyalty and respect," Anis continued.

"Indeed," I said, picking up where she had left off. "The western regions are crucial to the kingdom's defense. The thought of leaving them in such unreliable hands is very concerning to the crown."

"I guess we have to kill the lot of them after all," Anis said. "We can manage their territories directly for a while, but we'll have to find some second or third sons from loyal houses who aren't in line to inherit their own family holdings to take over. It will probably take time to train this lot's successors, but we should be able to stabilize the region within a few years."

"That's an encouraging thought, Anis."

Yes, speaking with her was enough to soothe my spirit, like removing a thorn from my aching heart.

Once again, the western nobles were reduced to silence.

When speaking to me, Anis had worn a gentle smile—but her expression as she turned back to the nobles was utterly frigid. The contrast was so sharp, she had to be trying to make them understand the precariousness of their situation.

"Do you understand now?" she asked firmly. "Or do I need to make it even clearer? Removing you all from the western regions poses no problem for us. In fact, I see nothing but benefits. So why *should* we bother keeping you alive?"

"Y-you'd really kill us all…?"

"Yes," Anis answered.

"I—I'm asking Queen Euphyllia!"

"Do you expect me to say anything different?" I replied.

"But we're of the same blood!" pleaded Count Leghorn, who had been shooting unpleasant glances at Anis for a while now.

Yes, I hated this man. What on earth did he think he was doing, going on about blood?

"Tell me, what exactly are you trying to say?"

"Do we not share the blood of the same ancestors, endowed with the miraculous gift of magic?! Yes, we've committed grave sins! Which is why we're saying we'll make amends—we'll change our ways! Why won't you believe us?!"

"Because I don't trust you."

"B-but why not?!"

"Let me ask *you* a question. Tell me, why *should* I spare you all?"

"You're the second coming of our founder! The very legend that saved the people in another age! It's because we've lost sight of a true king, one we're *meant* to serve, that some of us have been led astray! With a righteous leader,

we would never have committed these offenses! Isn't that right?!"

"…What? Do you really want me to kill you here and now?"

Anis was furious, and the aura around her was the most terrifying it had ever been.

Count Leghorn let out an audible gasp as he fell to his knees. The nobles around him likewise buckled, trembling in fear as they collapsed to the ground in turn.

Even the knights standing guard were affected by Anis's fury. While they remained on their feet, their faces turned deathly pale, many of them gritting their teeth against the fear.

"It's a shame how many nobles resent the royal family because of your devotion to spirit worship," she said. "You've warped your beliefs. Instead of nurturing its teachings, you use them to oppress people and divide the country. You're completely out of step with the times."

"I'm sorry, Anis," I answered. "It looks like we'll need to rethink how to change people's minds."

"This isn't your fault, Euphie. And worshipping spirits isn't directly to blame, either. The problem is with nobles like these, using their religion as a tool to fuel their own greed." Glaring at the still motionless crowd, Anis breathed a heavy sigh. "The point of magicology and magical tools is to give *everyone* the ability to use magic, so they don't need to rely solely on the nobility. Because when nobles are the only ones with access to magic, it causes all sorts of misunderstandings."

"M-misunderstandings…?!" one noble cried.

"R-right! You must realize, Princess Anisphia, that non-noble magic users have also committed heinous acts over the years!"

"Doesn't that make restoring the rights of the nobility all the more important?!"

Anis turned a cold eye to these desperate appeals.

"Again, the arrogance of the nobility was ultimately what was behind those

incidents, wasn't it? You thought you could trample the common folk underfoot. Of course that caused bitterness and resentment. The ringleaders you're referring to were the illegitimate children of nobles, cast out into the wild to fend for themselves. Am I wrong?"

"…Well…"

"Look at you all. You can find your voices when it suits you, but your mouths clamp shut when you're told to explain yourselves… Are you so stupid, you don't even realize you're only angering us even more than you already have?"

Sure enough, the nobles had no answer to this question.

Anis exhaled in exasperation. "Noble or commoner, at a purely human level, you're not worthy of anyone's trust. No, we can't leave the west in your hands. That is as clear as day."

"…"

"But you *do* have one saving grace."

At this, the nobles jolted upright in anticipation.

"You're rotten to the core, but you *are* nobles, and you *can* use magic. You're a valuable asset. We're not just going to throw you to the wind."

"R-right…!" they cried.

"We can't forgive you. But we won't take your lives."

At last, it was my turn to take over from Anis.

"In exchange, I'm relocating you all from the west to the south," I declared.

"What?!"

The nobles gaped. A range of emotions fell over them, from astonishment to fear to outright frustration. As they came to grasp their situation, a few raised cries of discontent.

"T-to the south?!"

"Are you crazy?! That's as good as a death sentence!"

Why were they so opposed? No doubt because the south was a highly

problematic region.

The Kingdom of Palettia's southern provinces bordered the sea. The area provided rich opportunities for resource extraction, but we were still trying to work out how best to develop it.

Unfortunately, hordes of monsters also inhabited those lands, and it was a considerable challenge establishing a foothold by the sea. We had already been forced to retreat numerous times over.

Ultimately, while the south promised valuable resources, it was difficult to properly develop. Part of that was because we'd never had enough personnel to explore the area and settle the land.

It was Lang and the others who had come up with this proposal to seize the western nobles' territories.

By doing so, the nobles could keep their lives while serving the nation. Though the kingdom's southern reaches were largely unexplored, the potential reward to be had and the honor to be won meant there was potential to leave a lasting legacy.

To the western nobles, this opportunity to redeem their honor was infinitely better than being stripped of their rights and sentenced to death.

Anis had likewise realized it was a good idea, and so the nobles' punishment had already been effectively decided—their western territories were to be seized by the crown, while they were to be granted holdings in the south to cultivate and develop.

I could understand why they were cowering before me. It wasn't wrong to say this could be a death sentence in its own right. But if they could successfully develop the land I was giving them, it certainly wasn't impossible for them to make a comeback. It was far from a bad deal, all things considered.

"Yes, the southern regions will be difficult to settle," I continued. "But Anis has learned a great deal that will aid you, thanks to her efforts building the new magicology city."

"B-but—"

“Your task is to emulate her successful example. It may take time, but it should be within your abilities to establish a foothold for continued development. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“W-we’re to copy Princess Anisphia’s methods…?!”

“They’ve already proven successful, so it shouldn’t be too difficult to adapt them to the environment in the south. Do you disapprove?”

The nobles glanced uneasily at one another. They were clearly dissatisfied with the situation.

It was unbelievable how they insisted on questioning Anis’s accomplishments and looking down on her for not being able to use spirit magic when they couldn’t achieve anything themselves. They refused to follow in her footsteps.

Magic or no magic, couldn’t they see their attitudes eroded any trust?

“If you insist on appealing, then you leave me with no other choice than to let Anis decide your fate,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll destroy them after all, then. We don’t need rebellious lords who refuse to heed a royal command,” Anis said coolly. The nobles’ eyes widened in alarm, but Anis hadn’t finished. “You refuse to follow royal commands. You insult us. You’ve been found guilty, yet you try to escape punishment. You won’t obey even when offered the means to save yourselves. You *still* think you’re better than us, don’t you? There’s no other explanation.”

“I-it isn’t like—”

“No? You’ve been throwing a tantrum ever since you got here. Why do you keep arguing? Are you trying to challenge me directly? If that’s what you want, fine. Go home and prepare yourselves for war.”

“W-war…?!”

The nobles gasped, their faces turning even paler than before.

“Why are you so scared? I’m just a useless, incompetent princess who can’t use magic, am I not? So I’ll show you exactly what I’m capable of. Who knows, it might make you reconsider your opinion of Euphie as well.”

“I would like that.” I exchanged a grin with Anis.

If they so much as scratched her, I would brand them all as criminals and banish them to the south for manual labor.

I didn't think the nobles' faces could blanch further, but they proved me wrong.

I wanted to avoid a civil war, but if one was forced on me, I would respond with full force. Father-in-law may have chosen a path of nonconfrontation, but I was confident the kingdom could weather any potential conflict intact.

If anything, these nobles were a hindrance to keep around. If they refused to mend their ways no matter what, then they left me with no choice but to let them go.

"The kingdom's southern reaches are challenging areas, but if you succeed in developing them, there are lucrative rewards to be found," I pointed out.

"The crown won't want to ignore any profits that can be reaped. And there's every possibility you could make a comeback, you know?" Anis added.

"Should that happen, I'd be willing to reevaluate my assessment of you."

"Seeing the troubles you've all faced, the difficulties governing the western regions could hardly be clearer. We can't let your corruption continue, but if you want to survive, we'll give you the opportunity to do so. This is the only way to save your lives." This was Anis's final warning. "What I've given the people of this kingdom is possibility, and that includes you. Nonetheless, you must repent for your crimes. I hope you'll reflect and change your ways. If you can't do that, the conversation ends here. Choose wisely."

* * *

"That was certainly a bold approach." Lang nodded in admiration at the results of the confrontation.

"Essentially, it's like sentencing them to death by exile…but it isn't without a chance for redemption. And now that Commander Anisphia has shown what's possible with the new magicology city, it's reasonable to follow her example," Miguel added, smiling happily to himself.

Once I had handed down the nobles' sentence, my advisors and I went to debrief in private.

While the western nobles were left in somber silence, like attendees at a funeral, our mood was remarkably lighthearted.

"I believe I was able to make the right decision thanks to the information you all compiled," I said gratefully. "Without the option of relocating them to the south, I would have been forced to strip them of their titles and sentence them to death."

"We're just lucky Marquis Sienna corroborated it all. Also, we knew they weren't *all* corrupt, so we needed a more balanced solution," Miguel answered.

"What about Marquis Sienna? He did cooperate with the crown to shine a light on the truth, but even so…"

"We won't give him preferential treatment—not that he wanted that anyway," Anis said. "Actually, he's taken the initiative in agreeing to move to the south. The nobles loyal to him should join him, and I'm sure he'll protect them as best he can."

"Hmm. Maybe he should have spoken up sooner. Then again, considering the political situation in the west, I can see why he didn't press his luck…," Miguel murmured.

"Yes." Anis nodded. "That's why we had no choice but to overhaul the political landscape there. It's going to be a headache setting it right, though…"

"Rest assured, Duke Magenta has offered to assist in that regard," Marion said.

"I'd say this is a good opportunity for us to recruit and train more personnel," Lang added.

"…I should be grateful, I suppose," I muttered under my breath.

After the coup attempt that resulted in King Orphans taking the throne, my father was tasked with rebuilding the kingdom's eastern regions, devastated by the civil war. Thanks to that, he had built a wide network of loyal nobles. It was a great relief to have his help finding individuals to take over leadership in the western regions.

"It remains to be seen whether the western nobles will accept this territorial

exchange," Miguel murmured.

After all, the nobles I had just addressed were merely representatives of a larger cohort. Their immediate task was to return to their holdings and inform their peers of the news, though messengers had been sent ahead to keep the region from descending into outright panic.

"They *have* to accept it, don't they? I mean, turning it down is basically suicide," Gark said.

"...*Is* there any chance of them turning against the crown?" Navre asked quietly, his eyebrows coming together in a frown.

"I'd say no," Lang answered with a shake of his head.

"I highly doubt it," Miguel added.

"They're loyal to their own interests. Even if they could survive turning against the crown, they should be able to figure out there's no real future going down that path... At least I hope so," Lang said as if trying to convince himself, a hint of doubt entering his voice.

Hearing this, Anis broke out into a wry grin. "We've already made plans if they do decide to rebel."

"Lady Anis? What do you mean?" Lang asked.

"What kind of plans exactly?" Miguel added.

"Um... Could *you* explain, Euphie?" Anis prompted.

"I don't mind. First of all, the western nobles developed a sense of solidarity by knowing everyone else's weaknesses. When the crown discovered the extent of their crimes, however, that solidarity evaporated. If they did manage to unite as one, it would be by rebelling against the crown over the land exchange."

"To be honest, now that the central and eastern nobles have joined forces, there's no way the west can win." Anis nodded, taking over where I left off. "Up until now, we've overlooked their crimes because we needed them, but now that we have the means to fill the void left by their absence, there's no need to keep them around."

"Their options are either to give up and acquiesce or somehow try to escape. I

don't see them working together again. When not united by a common interest, the western nobles really are quite vulnerable."

"I…see?" Gark said.

"Hey, Gark! You're nodding because you follow, right?" Navre commented.

"…"

"Hey! Don't look away!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at the pair's usual banter.

Anis must have felt the same way, as she was wearing a wry smile. In fact, I was sure my expression was no different.

"There's another idea I want to discuss—I'd like to organize a tournament," Anis said.

"A tournament? What do you mean, Princess Anisphia?" Lang asked.

"A competition where knights and adventurers can compete regardless of title or status. I'm thinking of recruiting anyone who performs well in it. I wouldn't be surprised if other knightly orders take notice, too."

"Right! Some of the western nobles would probably rather risk joining knightly orders based in the south than be sent down there as criminals," Gark said, clapping his hands in excitement.

Anis flashed him an embarrassed smile. "We have to station new people in the western region anyway, so I thought having skilled people compete might be a good way to recruit replacements."

"Ah… So you want to invite fighters from all over the Kingdom of Palettia."

"Of course. This isn't just about the western region. There are talented people hiding all over the central and eastern provinces, too, especially among the knights and adventurers."

"I can see how that would garner interest. If they do well, they might even be able to serve you or Queen Euphyllia directly, Commander Anisphia," Navre said in agreement.

It was a positive response all around. Yet my smile was weak. After all, this

wasn't our idea.

"It was Marquis Sienna who suggested it," Anis said. "I have mixed feelings about the man, but I have to admit, he was very proactive about trying to atone for his crimes… He's in a complicated position, too, I suppose. The more I learn about the western regions, the more difficult they look to govern. Simply punishing the nobles won't be enough."

"It won't?"

"No. There are relations with neighboring countries to think about, relationships with merchants, and all kinds of things. The conclusion we reached was that we need to crack down on the merchants on a large scale," she said with a troubled look. "Power originally lay with the nobles, but it's shifted to the merchants in a lot of ways. The nobles can't ignore the merchants' wishes, but if the merchants push too hard, they risk provoking a backlash. It's a mess."

"Simply eliminating the western nobles won't stop the merchants from trying to take over. There's a risk that they could flee the country, or that they might try buying the loyalty of any new nobles installed in the area. In fact, the merchants are probably going to be even more of a headache than the nobles."

"I was hoping to entice the merchants with the promise of increased profits, but I don't think we're going to be able to do that anytime soon. Still, we can't afford to neglect them, either, seeing that neighboring countries might start getting ideas if the chaos continues too long."

"I see… That sounds like a real challenge."

"It's going to be tough, no doubt about it. I think the younger generation of nobles from the west is going to have a very difficult time. But that doesn't mean I can just forgive them. Especially not that Count Leghorn."

As soon as the count's name was mentioned, the atmosphere soured.

Everyone had their own thoughts on his conduct. After all, he was born of the nobility just as they were.

"I've heard rumors… Was it as bad as they say?"

"He's too obsessed with his faith, no better than the Ministry of the Arcane back in the old days…"

"That's a painful way to put it…"

"You've softened up, Lang, and you weren't even that bad in the first place. Anyway, this kind of issue has to be fixed over time. You can't rush it when you want to reshape people's mindsets. Forcing people into harsh environments certainly isn't an easy way to go about it."

"I have no sympathy for them. They dug this hole themselves. They had plenty of opportunities to turn around."

That was true. When I thought about what lay ahead for them, all I could do was breathe a sigh.

Once more, I felt sorry for Father-in-law. I was frankly amazed he had done so well rebuilding the country while dealing with the nobility at the same time.

"But where would we hold this tournament?" Navre asked.

"Our place," Anis answered.

"Huh? *Our place?*"

"In the magicology city. We want to turn it into a trade hub anyway, and it will be a good opportunity to showcase our progress building the city with magic. And we've got more than enough space to set up a venue."

Navre seemed skeptical at first, but he slowly nodded in understanding. "…I suppose that's true."

"We'll have to build accommodations and the like. We would have needed to do that someday, so we'd just be moving the schedule forward a little. Afterward, the tournament venue can be used to test new magical tools. It makes sense to hold it there."

"…But can we get everything ready in time?"

"That shouldn't be a problem. I'm planning to take a leave of absence and to stay in the magicology city for a while," Euphie said.

"…Lady Euphyllia?" Navre's eyes widened.

“Euphie needs a change of scenery, and it’d be easier to manage the work to get ready for the tournament on-site,” Anis explained. “Plus, with her magic, construction should proceed even faster.”

“Lady Euphyllia is going to be involved in construction?!”

“…That *would* speed things along. But are you sure?”

“Of course. It will be a little fun while I’m on holiday.”

“‘A little fun’…?” Navre repeated, seemingly unable to believe his ears. He glanced over at Lang as if looking for support but was met only with a thin smile and a shake of the head.

Lang *did* have a lot to say in private, but Anis and I had pushed through.

“I thought it was about time to silence the naysayers,” I continued. “People underestimate me because they haven’t seen me use my abilities. I’ve tried to avoid being too forceful with them out of respect for King Orphans, but I think people see me as weak. It’s time to correct those mistaken assumptions.”

“…So you’re basically gonna slap them across the face with your skills?” Gark asked.

“Hey. Don’t stare at me…,” Navre muttered, glancing away.

In any event, I was looking forward to staying in the magicology city. I planned to bring Lainie and Ilia with me as well, so hopefully we could all take a breather.

Lainie would be able to spend a little time with her father, Baron Cyan, so she could treat it as a vacation, too.

CHAPTER 6
A View to the Future

"Ah... It's a magnificent view," Anis said as we watched the scenery unfolding in front of us.

"It is wonderful," I answered.

We were standing on an empty plot of land outside the walls of the magicology city—or rather, a formerly empty plot of land.

A large square had already been completed on it so that the knights could conduct their training exercises. Buildings meant to serve as resting places lined the perimeter, and there were people coming and going in the distance.

"So this is where we'll be holding the tournament," I said out loud.

"Yes," Anis answered. "Afterward, we'll use it as the magicology knights' official headquarters and training grounds. It was already on the agenda, but we moved construction forward for the tournament."

"Building this was a lot of fun."

"...It certainly was."

I could hear my voice brightening. Yes, it had been a great time.

Anis flashed me a grin. After all, I was the one who built this plaza.

After wrapping up the problem of the western nobles, I had journeyed to the magicology city for a little rest and recuperation.

I did, in fact, need time to recover. Though I wasn't laid up in bed, it took time for me to regain my human senses. As I still had my mobility, I decided to help out with the ongoing construction efforts in the magicology city.

That being said, I didn't want to interfere with any projects already underway.

As such, I thought it would be a good idea if I assembled the tournament venue itself. Once my proposal was accepted, I set about fully implementing it.

Using magic without a care in the world for what others might think turned out to be surprisingly refreshing.

"We've removed obstructions, cleared the land, and used magic to lay the foundations. All that's left is to assemble everything… You could probably build the entire city all by yourself, Euphie," Anis joked.

Indeed, if I could wield my magic without restriction, that might be possible.

"If there were others as skilled in magic as I am, you wouldn't even need me," I pointed out.

"Ha-ha, that's a good one."

"I wasn't kidding…"

"…I know. Well, let's talk about something else."

"Oh-ho. Yes, we can do that."

"Um… What about the western region? Are things okay over there?"

"Yes. Father and Father-in-law are looking after it."

I had asked them both to oversee the land transfer with the western nobles.

As was to be expected, once word of the territory transfer reached them, the western nobles flew into a blind rage. The nobles sent to the capital were subjected to immense criticism on their return, and some had even been denounced and cast out by their own families.

"I heard some houses begged to be exempted from the transfer, arguing that their new heads weren't involved in their predecessors' wrongdoing," Anis said.

"Indeed."

"Haah… What made them think they'd get away with that? They really are out of their minds…"

"The more you shake the tree, the more that comes falling down…"

Naturally, there could be no accepting such arguments.

Even if the family head was replaced, the crimes committed by their house wouldn't be undone. The crown couldn't forgive such acts—and more importantly, the common folk who called the west home wouldn't, either.

The nobles made such a fuss about the territorial transfer that the people who lived under them were fully aware of their transgressions.

Inevitably, the common folk were furious. Word had reached me that they were agitating against both the local lords and the merchants as well. Father-in-law even reported that the situation was so volatile, there was a risk of rebellion breaking out.

The nobles and merchants were responsible for defrauding the crown and their people. Due to their positions, they were already considered affluent, and they had been abusing their privileges to further enrich themselves.

Before I left, Father-in-law told me he was worried about the consequences of the crown's intervention.

And indeed, once the nobles and merchants figured out how to successfully pursue their interests, they started betraying and undermining each other.

One noble would sell out the others in the hopes of saving himself, but then the next person did the same, and again and again it went on…

Before long, we had a mountain of accusations and corroborating evidence of the western nobles' corruption. Among them were numerous false claims, so Miguel had his work cut out for him separating fact from fiction.

According to him, his workload had tripled.

"Do they have no pride?!" he had apparently cried out in indignation, at least according to the report Anis had received from Marion and Lang.

I broke into laughter at the time. It was hard to imagine Miguel saying something like that.

But we couldn't leave the situation unresolved.

As such, we moved up our plans and publicly announced the territorial exchange. In order to appease the discontent of the commoners, I

acknowledged their lords' wrongdoing and offered the crown's protection to those who agreed to relocate to the south.

They didn't want to go, of course, but if they stayed where they were, they risked getting caught up in an uprising. If riots broke out, I would have to intervene to maintain order throughout the region.

As it happened, the crown had already intervened in several territories. Count Leghorn, the one who had hurled insults at Anis, was one lord who had allowed a revolt to take place.

I had no sympathy for the man. When word of his actions in the capital spread, even his own retainers distanced themselves from him. There was no one to stop the furious people of his lands, while some of the count's followers were said to have actually incited the riot.

The crown's intervention had saved lives. I was certain of that now. The count's inability to govern had been made clear, and I stripped him of all titles and honors.

Now, it was more appropriate to call him the *former* Count Leghorn.

As a result of the riots, the western nobles folded. Dangerous though the south was, they risked falling victim to a popular revolt if they stayed. And of course, should the people rise up, the crown would be forced to intervene, further weakening their situation.

In the end, they took the only option available to them.

The merchants dabbling in illegal commerce were no better off. Their trafficking in illicit goods had been made possible only by the support of the nobles. Now that their backers had lost everything, the merchants were without protection.

And unlike the nobles, the merchants didn't have the option of transferring their territories and holdings to the south. For those involved in particularly grievous crimes, such as dealing in slaves and contraband, the death penalty was sometimes warranted.

With their lives in danger, it was only natural that some of the merchants would try to escape. Thanks to the cooperation of Marquis Sienna and his

fellow loyalists, however, they were quickly apprehended and brought to justice.

There was some concern among my advisors that trade in the west might be driven to a standstill given the sheer number of merchants detained, but apparently fresh blood had moved in swiftly to fill the void.

We would have to keep a close eye on them to ensure that they upheld the kingdom's laws, but that was only one of many challenges in establishing a new social order in the west.

Which brought us to our current situation—the best option for the disgraced nobles now was to make a name for themselves in the tournament before being dispatched to the south.

I sensed we still had many busy days ahead of us, but at least a solution was now in sight.

Yes. It felt like the clouds were clearing, like a huge weight had been lifted from my chest.

"Once the tournament is behind us, everything should settle down," I said, hoping for the best.

"Right… And you'll be going back to the capital," Anis said.

"…Yes."

I was having the time of my life in the magicology city.

Here, I could live in Anis's mansion not as the queen, but as a normal person called Euphyllia.

If there were any political affairs in the capital that absolutely required my attention, I could always hurry back by Airbike—but for the most part, I was able to truly relax and enjoy myself. Thanks to Anis's best efforts to take care of me, I had already regained much of my sense of humanity.

Of course, I knew I couldn't stay here forever. I *did* have to fulfill my duties as queen…

"What is the point of a monarch…?" I wondered out loud.

Monarchs were indispensable as symbols of a united nation. They were the cornerstone of its sense of identity, a necessary element for a peaceful, cohesive society. I understood that well. Despite that, the recent incident had given me cause to question what kind of leader the kingdom really needed.

The first king had become a spirit covenantor to ease his people's plight, but he ultimately became a destructive mirror of his people's wishes. In the end, human hands brought about his destruction.

And so, with the help of magic, the aristocracy had defended the realm up to the present day. We endeavored to preserve magic, to keep it from being used for ill and leading the nation astray.

Yet still there came those individuals who hoped to use me to their own ends, to steer the country in an unfavorable direction.

Not everyone would understand or appreciate my dream. I knew that. It was only natural that some people would wish to see the kingdom take a different course. When I reflected on that incongruity, a deep sense of unease filled my heart.

"The point of monarchs?" Anis repeated. "That's a tough one. I guess they're the ones who stand at the top of the country, a symbol of sorts."

Her answer was much the same as my own. I, too, believed a monarch was meant to lead, to serve as inspiration to their people.

"But I guess the *kind* of monarch you need depends on the country itself. That's especially the case here, what with the Kingdom of Palettia being built on magic," Anis continued.

"Yes, that's definitely true."

"So I don't think you can find the right type of leader for us without considering magic."

"Meaning...we *have* to take magic into consideration?"

"Magic has always protected the Kingdom of Palettia. That's why the people who could use it were so revered and ended up with an elevated status. Basically, it took root as an essential part of the nation. It's a source of pride and

admiration. After a while, people started seeing nobles as superior beings."

"…But that pride has corrupted the aristocracy."

"Yeah… Maybe nobles *are* esteemed and all, but I don't think real strength comes so easily. They're only human after all."

"That they are…"

"Maybe you need to be particularly strong at heart to resist the temptations that come from being a noble… Maybe that's why I ended up running away from my responsibilities. Sure, there are differences between royals and nobles, but on that point, they're pretty similar. At least it seems that way to me."

"Does that mean you have to be unusually strong to serve as a noble…?" I wondered.

There may have been a shred of truth to that idea.

An image of Marquis Sienna rose in the back of my mind. The last time I saw him, he looked like a tired old man.

He had been unable to stop the corruption among his peers, but maybe we had him to thank for the fact that it hadn't gotten any worse. When you put it that way, it was difficult to assess his contributions…

The marquis had hoped for an ideal king but ultimately gave up when he realized he didn't have the power to shape events as he might please.

I didn't want to admit it, but maybe the former Count Leghorn had sought salvation in much the same way. Perhaps he had sought to escape the harshness of the world by pursuing what he truly believed in. It made sense.

"How do we become stronger, then…?" I asked.

"That's a toughie…but I think I have my own answer."

"What?"

"Caring about people—yourself included."

"Valuing people… Yes, that's certainly true."

It was a very clear answer—looking after yourself and others made you stronger.

I watched Anis as she flashed me a shy smile. At that, we both broke into laughter.

"What's so funny? I was being serious," Anis said.

"You laughed first. I was only watching you."

"I mean, you were staring at me so intently."

"You know why, don't you?"

"Ngh! Shut up already!" she moaned, covering her face with her hands as the heat rose to her cheeks.

It was an adorable gesture, one that filled my heart with warmth.

"...You know, Euphie?"

"What?"

"I'd love to win the tournament myself," she murmured softly.

I startled, staring back wide-eyed.

Anis had noted some time ago that she wished to take part in the tournament, mostly as a way to get back at those who doubted her magical tools and to restore her reputation after the recent troubles.

From what I heard, Navre, Gark, and Baron Cyan had also signed up.

But this was the first time she had said anything about winning. I hadn't thought she was interested in showing off her abilities and strength...

"What's this all of a sudden?" I asked.

"I've been thinking... I wonder if I've been too modest."

"Huh?"

"Not engaging with the nobles, I mean. It's become a long-ingrained habit, I think..."

"...Well, there are times you do seem a little reserved."

I always thought that was her coping strategy as a royal family member unable to use magic.

“Yeah, but it makes me look weak. I was okay with them thinking that before, but it can’t go on. I mean, their disregard for me ended up hurting you, Euphie.”

“That’s entirely on them, if you ask me.”

“Sure, but I wonder if it wouldn’t have happened if I’d demonstrated my strength in a way they couldn’t ignore. They would probably be more wary about me if I did, but that would still be better than their constant mockery.”

“I see… No, it won’t do for them to keep underestimating you. But are you sure?”

To be perfectly honest, I considered Anis one of the five best fighters in the entire kingdom.

In the Kingdom of Palettia, where magic was absolute, Anis’s powers might be seen as heretical. While magical tools were becoming more widespread and people had begun to accept magicology, seeing her abilities in person could still cause anxiety.

I understood the argument some might make—that she didn’t need to necessarily exert her strength—but I could see why she wanted to change people’s perceptions of her.

My only worry was that she might end up getting hurt in the process.

“I do have misgivings, if I’m being entirely honest,” she said as if reading my mind.

“Anis…”

“I don’t want to do anything that comes across as too forceful. I guess my experience with Allie shaped my thinking. I was afraid that if people thought I was too strong or skilled, it would attract unnecessary attention. That scared me.”

It was tragic. Given her heretical research, she couldn’t afford to make too much of a scene, and when she did do something out in public, she had to make sure not to be taken advantage of by others.

When I remembered the way she was back then—hiding her face behind a mask, self-deprecatingly assuming she was without merit—it was like a claw

tearing into my heart.

She flashed me a smile—a gentle and reassuring one, exuding strength and trust.

"But there was something even scarier than all that," she said.

"What…?"

"Not being able to protect you."

My heart skipped a beat as I took in those words. Now *that* came as a surprise.

While I was busy trying to remain calm, Anis continued, "If my hesitation ever made me fail to protect you, I'd regret it for the rest of my life. But I can't just run away. Because I want people to believe I'm worthy of standing by your side. I want to be recognized as the *only* person worthy of it. That my being with you is best for everyone."

"Anis…"

"So I'll make them acknowledge me. Even if some of them are afraid of me afterward. Once they've accepted me, I'll be able to give everyone hope."

Her smile as she said all this was so brilliant that I almost couldn't bear to look at her.

Something had changed in her, but I couldn't quite pinpoint what. One thing was clear, however—this change was unmistakably for the better.

Her smile filled me with reassurance, with so much joy that I felt like breaking out into a dance.

"So first of all, I want to win the tournament. I want to be the strongest knight commander in the kingdom's history. How does that sound?"

"…Anis?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll start working on a congratulatory speech."

"Yeah."

"Try not to get hurt."

"I won't."

"Don't go overboard, and make sure you don't slip up."

"Yeah."

"I'm here for you."

"I know."

"...And I'll be waiting. So come back quickly."

I had learned something about myself recently—I didn't have much patience. Though maybe Anis had already noticed that?

* * *

The day of the tournament had finally arrived. Organizers had set up makeshift spectator stands around the square I had built, and the participants were starting to gather in the center.

I had nothing but gratitude to the carpenters for hastily building inns and accommodations for all the visitors. There was no way we would have been able to host so many people without their kind assistance.

Perhaps I should consider giving them some kind of award or commendation once the competition is over?

I was seated in a special area set aside for the royal family. Father-in-law, Mother-in-law, my father, and Commander Sprout from the Royal Guard were all present as well.

"Ah, it's an auspicious day!" Commander Sprout exclaimed.

"Ha-ha! You're letting your hair down, I see, Matthew," the former king responded.

"You could say I'm on vacation. Although officially I'm here to observe the tournament."

"You're getting awfully cunning in your old age. Did you pull some strings to watch your son compete?"

"Dear me, Your Majesty! You shouldn't bandy about accusations like that!"

"It's not *Your Majesty* anymore. Just call me Orphans, like you did in the old days."

"Ha-ha-ha! Begging your pardon, Orphans!"

…Since when had the two of them been such good friends?

As I looked on in surprise, Mother-in-law leaned my way with a gentle smile. "Matthew was deeply involved in suppressing the coup, so he and Orphans became quite close. He's a very serious man, though. He doesn't like to flaunt their relationship in the open."

"I *am* the commander of the Royal Guard, so it behooves me to keep public and private separate," he said.

"You always say that when trying to shirk your duties. Did you think I hadn't noticed?" my father interjected.

"Now, now, Grantz. Are you selling me out?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

Both the former king and my father seemed to be enjoying themselves, at least judging by their mischievous smiles.

I found it rather startling… I mean, knowing my father's personality and all…

"I'd rather you not be in such a sightseeing mood, Matthew. You're technically here for official business," my father pointed out.

"You say that, but you're referring to me on a first-name basis, Grantz."

"I'm telling you to use some discretion."

"You're as fastidious as ever. Wouldn't you agree, Queen Euphyllia?"

"Huh? Oh… Ha-ha… Duke Grantz does have a bit of a mean streak."

"Ha-ha-ha! There are no prying eyes here! No one will complain if you treat him like your dad, the way you used to!" Commander Sprout said with a cheerful laugh.

As I struggled to respond, Father-in-law flashed me a knowing grin. "No one will chastise you for being yourself in our presence, Euphyllia."

"But still…"

"It's common knowledge that you and Grantz have cut ties and that you often clash when it comes to political matters. It's all well and good to be cautious, but there's no need to completely sever your relationship. You just need to keep it under wraps. Even Matthew here loosens up in private."

"Is that a compliment?" Commander Sprout asked.

"It's only a recent development. You used to be so hardheaded and inflexible, Orphans would run away from you." Mother-in-law chuckled.

Commander Sprout let out a laugh as he scratched the back of his head. "Right! I picked up these bad habits from Orphans!"

"Don't be presumptuous! *I've* always been discreet!"

"Ah, I miss the good old days. I used to go the marketplaces in disguise while Matthew insisted on accompanying me."

"Yes, Your Majesty used to be a real troublemaker. Now you're a hard worker through and through…"

"Stop it! People are finally saying I've started acting my age!"

"Well, you've definitely filled out and put on a bit of muscle, haven't you? Yes, you look a lot like you did when we were young! You were never a good fighter, but your stamina and agility were second to none!"

"You still hold a grudge against me, Matthew?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Not at all! Ever since you became king, life has never been boring… No, it was wonderfully peaceful," Commander Sprout said with a grin.

He certainly seemed to be enjoying himself, but then again, so did the former king. It was nice to see.

All of a sudden, I noticed that Father looked unusually relaxed—another new discovery.

He must have noticed I was watching him, as he made eye contact with me. "If you can separate public and private, then there's nothing more for me to say. Do as you please."

"...I can?"

"If you're not confident, you can just keep going as you do in public. I don't mind."

...Now *that* got on my nerves. Why did he always have to be like this?

"I think our relationship is fine the way it is. I wouldn't want people to think we're still close. That could invite unneeded trouble."

"I see. We wouldn't want that. It makes life easier for me as well, not having to act differently around you because you're my daughter."

"How long are you planning on treating me like a child?"

"Well, let's see how long we can keep it up."

I clicked my tongue in annoyance.

Mother-in-law gawked at this childish reaction, but she quickly let out another laugh. "I can't believe I just saw you do that, Euphyllia..."

"...Excuse me."

"Grantz...," Father-in-law said disapprovingly.

"Oh, would you look at that? The first match is about to begin," my father said, changing the subject as he stared out over the square.

Cheers echoed all around. Many of those in attendance had been involved with the magicology city's construction. Since the city wasn't yet completed, there were few sources of entertainment available, so the tournament was warmly received.

In addition, there were those like my father and the others who were visiting from far afield.

The Kingdom of Palettia had begun seeking out talented individuals regardless of background or social standing, a trend that probably started with Anis's magicology city. Plenty of individuals had decided to seize the opportunity and were stepping up to take a chance.

I hoped this tournament would help further encourage that trend.

"It's quite a crowd," Commander Sprout remarked.

"Yes, it is," I answered.

"...It's a good thing the kingdom is finally settling down," he murmured in a voice so soft, it was almost drowned out by the hustle and bustle.

"...Commander?"

He was staring at the contestants as if witnessing some dazzling sight. Why was he acting like that? And what did he mean by what he said just now?

Perhaps sensing my lingering questions, he continued, "When Orphans took the throne, we didn't have the time or luxury for things like this. If we had tried holding a competition back then, the other lords would have criticized us as wasteful spendthrifts."

"That was after the coup was put down, so frugality was to be expected. Though I do remember being left speechless to see how many people were throwing parties. I always thought if they had that much money, they ought to put it toward something else..."

"The people at the Ministry of the Arcane loved to cause us headaches! They were always such a nuisance! They were all like Count Chartreuse back then, always thumbing their noses at the royal family."

"...Was it really that bad?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say *bad*. They were always very subtle about it. Orphans knew that if he didn't assert himself strongly, he wouldn't get any concessions from them. And of course, they didn't want to be seen as upsetting the crown directly, so they were always very circumspect. Frankly, it was quite impressive how they always managed to stand in the way while maintaining a veneer of plausible deniability."

"Enough, Matthew. You're making me feel old now," the former king grumbled.

Commander Sprout gave a light shrug. "They publicly supported Orphans's accession to the throne, but in reality, they weren't much help... They didn't contribute much during the civil war, either, for that matter."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. Well, they were originally researchers of magic, not battlefield warriors. They fired off magic to keep enemies away during defensive battles, but that's about it. They did have impressive skills, though, I'll give them that."

"Even that was something. At least we didn't have to worry about watching our backs."

"Grantz and Sylphine carried us through entirely on their shoulders. Ah, it brings back memories."

"…It sounds like you didn't consider the previous Minister of the Arcane a trustworthy partner, either, Father-in-law," I observed.

"Well, he was always complaining and scheming, but as much as I hate to admit it, the government wouldn't be able to function without the ministry."

"Hmm. They were never as insulting as the western nobles were to you. Even Chartreuse found that lot insufferable. But as much as I couldn't stand him, he also despised me as an unreliable king."

"Which of us was worse, I wonder…? It would have been nice if the trustworthy nobles could have escaped punishment after the war, though…"

"If they had surrendered, they might have. But seeing as they wouldn't accept me as king, their fate was sealed."

"Many notable families, my own included, have died out…," Mother-in-law murmured with a distant gaze.

I'd looked over the records myself after becoming queen and found that a considerable number of noble houses had been extinguished following the coup attempt.

Many families, especially those that carried royal blood, were eliminated during the post-coup purges. Only a few such houses remained.

The remaining families had adopted children from blood relatives to lead and serve as their houses' heads. In exchange, the crown offered them its protection, but it meant that they lacked any real political power.

The next hardest hit were those that lost their prestige as punishment for their treachery. Strong houses often had their holdings split into two, effectively

reducing the forces under their control by half.

Many houses effectively went extinct, leaving behind only their family names. The marquisal House of Maise, Mother-in-law's family, was one such example.

"I couldn't hold a candle to Grantz or Sylphine in battle. You might say I had an inferiority complex…," Commander Sprout mused.

"An inferiority complex?"

"They both possess incredible skills with magic, yes? And with how splendidly they performed on the battlefield, they earned themselves a lot of recognition. We all thought we could make names for ourselves, enough that we could establish our own households. But in reality, Grantz and Sylphine were too powerful, easily eclipsing everyone else."

"…I see."

"Everyone was so desperate back then, ourselves included. We were young, and we couldn't fully grasp the situation that fate had thrust on us. We didn't have the luxury of time or patience. It took all we had just to bring stability to the realm… Seeing you now, Your Majesty, I worry we weren't diligent enough."

"…I wonder if people would consider me a good queen," I found myself murmuring softly.

At this, all eyes turned to me. *Uh-oh*, I thought—but by then, the words had already escaped my lips.

"Sorry. Forget I said that," I urged.

"Hmm… A good queen? I'm afraid I can't say," Commander Sprout answered frankly.

Taken aback, I glanced up at him. When our eyes met, I noticed he was holding back a smile.

"Whether or not you're a good ruler isn't something you can decide yourself. Of course, you can strive to be good, but that doesn't necessarily mean people will think of you that way."

"…That's true."

“In the end, it depends on the person. If you ask me, people can only decide if a ruler was good or bad after they’ve finished the job.”

“…When I’m no longer queen, you mean.”

“Even a good king or queen doesn’t know how long they’ll reign. Isn’t that the case with Orphans? His reputation still isn’t settled! Some call him gentle, others indecisive!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, stop it,” Father-in-law muttered.

“Orphans also tried juggling a whole host of issues, hence the divided opinion. What do you think, Your Majesty? Would you say Orphans was a good king?”

“…He was to me, at least.”

“Now that’s an honor, wouldn’t you say, Orphans?”

“Why are you asking me that? You’re acting like I made her say it,” Father-in-law grumbled in annoyance.

But it wasn’t like that at all, I thought to myself…

“I’m happy to hear you regard Orphans as a good king, Queen Euphyllia. But there were those, like Count Chartreuse, who thought otherwise. In the end, who decides whether you’re a good leader or not?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Indeed. No one can decide. That’s why you have to find the answer within yourself. ‘I believe this person was a good ruler.’ Though if I had to define what exactly makes a good ruler, I would say someone who is chosen by their people.”

“How so…?”

“Strictly speaking, it doesn’t really matter who does the choosing. It’s fine if it’s only one person who makes the selection. If they trust in you, if they believe in you, if they’re willing to follow you. People who are seen like that tend to make the best rulers.”

“…Then what about me? Am I on the path to being a good queen?”

“Hmm… Let me ask you a question. Do you see yourself as lonely, Your

Majesty?”

“What?” I was surprised by this unexpected question. Was I lonely…?

“How about it? Are you alone?”

“…No, I don’t think so. I have someone who matters the world to me by my side.”

“Then that’s your answer. No one wants to follow a fool of a leader. If you aren’t lonely, then you must have someone who loves and admires you.”

“…Of course.”

Anis’s face was the first to come to mind. Then, one by one, those of so many others flashed before my eyes.

Right. I *wasn’t* alone.

“You can’t become a good king or queen simply by wishing for it. Yes, it’s important to strive to be a good ruler, but you’ll always have moments when you doubt yourself, when you ask if you’re really setting foot down the right path. The only way to find the answer is to look at those around you and use them as a mirror.”

“Ah, I understand…”

Come to think of it, the others had all said something similar at one point or another.

Lumi, Lainie, Anis, and Commander Sprout—each of them was conveying an incredibly meaningful lesson to me.

“Take care of those who walk with you. They’ll help you one day in ways you can’t even begin to imagine.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“What do you think, Grantz? That sounded pretty good, if I do say so myself.”

“Is that supposed to be a jab at me?” my father said, narrowing his eyes in a squint.

Commander Sprout responded with a shrug of his shoulders: “Ha-ha-ha! I have absolutely no idea why you would think that!”

"Hmph. If we're talking about good rulers, you should consider what makes a good vassal."

"Someone who endeavors to work diligently in the service of their liege lord. Naturally."

"...Commander Sprout here seems to be acting more like a father or friend, I'd say."

"Surprising, isn't it?"

"Very."

Given my father's personality, I had cause to wonder if he had any friends other than Father-in-law and his entourage.

Commander Sprout, for his part, nodded his head repeatedly as though he found all this amusing. "Yes, yes. It's all well and good to keep a firm boundary between personal and professional matters, but that principle can only go so far, wouldn't you agree?"

"I wouldn't have expected to hear that from you, Matthew."

"I'm simply learning from Grantz's example. Both good and bad."

"...I'm deeply moved by your assessment of him." Father-in-law, having been listening on to the pair's exchange, breathed a deep sigh.

The next moment, my father turned his gaze toward him. "Are you laughing at me, Orphans?"

"It's Sylphine who finds this amusing, I'm sure! I'm just worried! But you already know that. You're goading me!" Father-in-law shouted, but my father simply laughed in response.

Mother-in-law, on the other hand, was shaking with so much mirth that tears had welled up in her eyes.

As I watched all this unfold, it suddenly clicked—a good ruler was someone who could protect scenes like this. I grew up without knowing this side of my father and the others. Perhaps they had long been trying to keep it private, but it came as such a relief to finally witness it firsthand.

Maybe it was because I had become queen myself and taken on so many responsibilities that I could understand them now. Something told me I wouldn't be able to bear this burden if I was either too carefree or too uptight.

Over and over, people came to me wanting to know what to do, and I would no doubt continue to falter under the pressure they all placed on me.

That was why, to avoid going down the wrong path, I had to cherish my human connections, the people who truly cared about me. A whole new world was opening up before my eyes.

I wished I could laugh like my father and the others were. To do that, I needed to keep my composure. I had to make a country where everyone could afford to laugh with one another. Yes, that was my idea of a good ruler.

With that thought, I was struck by an overwhelming urge to see Anis's face.

"Oh, Matthew. Isn't that Navre?" Mother-in-law asked.

"S-so it's my fool son's turn? He's been improving a lot lately… Well, let's see how he does."

Turning back toward the field, I found it was indeed Navre's turn. His foe, judging by the staff clutched in his hands, appeared to be a noble.

Once the signal was given to begin, Navre dashed forward. His opponent, meanwhile, stepped back to maintain his distance as he prepared to cast a magic spell.

Within moments, however, Navre cut through the magic, closed the distance, and brought his Mana Blade up to his foe's neck. The match was over in seconds, and his noble opponent was left completely dumbfounded.

"That was no good. He was just your typical noble, relying too heavily on magic. Navre is still wet behind the ears, but that man was a cakewalk even for him," Commander Sprout said.

"Hmm. The only way that noble would be able to contribute on the battlefield would be by staying in the back," Father-in-law added.

"Why did he enter? Did he think he could win just by using magic?" Mother-in-law wondered out loud.

“He’s probably a western noble, one who doesn’t want to be sent to the south,” my father answered.

All four of them made scathing comments. It was certainly true, however, that no one would relish the idea of being banished to such a remote location. Some might even end up abandoning their posts and fleeing the kingdom altogether.

Unperturbed, Navre bowed to the audience before leaving the ground.

“I had hoped to see the fruit of Navre’s training today, but he’s going to need a better opponent than that,” Commander Sprout continued.

“He’s wielding a Mana Blade, but if he brought out the Vent that Anis made for him, he would be a force to be reckoned with,” I noted.

“You mean the new magical sword? I’d like to try it in my own hands. What do you say, Queen Euphyllia? Do you think the Royal Guard could get ahold of one?”

“I’ll consider it.”

While we were busy talking, the next round was getting underway. I was particularly interested in seeing how the knights of the Magicology Guard would perform.

There were many local participants, and it seemed quite a few of them had advanced to the next stage. Gark, I couldn’t help but notice, was among them, having won his first match without so much as a hitch.

Most of the nobles that my father and the others looked on unfavorably, on the other hand, were eliminated in the first round.

I felt like breathing a disappointed sigh at the thought that most were from the western regions, but a few of their members had managed to secure victory —mostly former members of one knightly order or another. They were clearly determined to carve out a future for themselves in this tournament.

Numerous concerns continued to linger in my mind, but the biggest one of all had to do with Anis.

I wasn’t worried about her per se. Her first opponent was a knight, but she

easily claimed victory with a single strike, the audience erupting in cheers at her brilliant display of skill.

Mother-in-law, I noticed, was watching with a proud look, while I felt my heart warming as well.

"I'm just worried she'll hurt her opponent…," I heard Father-in-law murmur under his breath.

Seriously, his concerns were in the opposite direction.

Before I knew it, the first rounds were complete—and having watched them all, I was convinced that Anis really would emerge victorious.

That wasn't to say the other entrants weren't skilled or capable—only that they paled in comparison to Anis as she was now.

Aside from her, the next standout fighter would have to be Baron Cyan, a former commoner renowned for his rise despite being unable to use magic.

I couldn't help but smile at the thought of Lainie sitting on the edge of her seat and of Ilia anxiously waiting beside her.

And so the second rounds got underway, and yet—

"Hmm? Anis's next opponent…," Father-in-law muttered.

"Um…"

"…Is that *him*?"

"Ah. The former Count Leghorn. It is, isn't it, Euphie?"

"Yes. I didn't realize he had entered the tournament…"

He was indeed the *former* Count Leghorn—with his titles revoked, he could no longer be considered a nobleman.

He was due to be sent to the south as a criminal to serve a sentence of hard labor. His only hope for redemption was to put in a strong showing here.

All things considered, I had to commend him for rising to the occasion. And yet…

"He's finished, isn't he?" Commander Sprout remarked.

“What rotten luck, running into Anis like this,” Mother-in-law added.

“Please don’t kill him, Anis…,” Father-in-law murmured under his breath.

Leghorn was holding a staff. Somehow, I must have missed his first match. Maybe it had taken place while I was busy talking with Commander Sprout?

In any event, he wouldn’t stand a chance against Anis if he relied on magic. Anis’s abilities made her a natural foe to traditional magic wielders.

The two faced one another, and the referee gave the signal to begin. I had hoped I could watch them free of worry, and yet—

“…O Spirits! Hear me at my time of crisis! Grant me a spirit covenant to bestow a true awakening upon this realm! Give me the power to make miracles come alive!”

…Did I just hear what I thought I did?

Puzzled, I turned toward Father-in-law, our eyes locking. He seemed as confused as I was. Was this really happening? But it looked like it was. The two of us breathed exhausted sighs.

My father, I noticed, was as expressionless as ever, while Mother-in-law wore a broad grin. There was, however, an unmistakable tension in the air.

Then came Commander Sprout. He was normally soft-spoken and gentle, but right now he wore a rare smirk.

“…Hmm. Actually seeing him firsthand, I don’t know what to say. He’s every bit as impudent as the rumors tell,” Father-in-law said.

“What crisis is he talking about? His own disgrace? It seems he’s the one who needs to wake up,” Mother-in-law added.

“If he needs a miracle to beat her, I suppose that speaks to Commander Anisphia’s prowess?” Commander Sprout joked.

“He certainly seems to lack to the ability to learn from his mistakes…,” my father muttered.

None of them held back with their harsh opinions—and I couldn’t disagree with any of them.

I never would have expected him to come out with such nonsense while confronting Anis directly.

"…Anis, you won't kill him, I hope?" I whispered.

If she did intentionally injure or kill him, she would be disqualified on the spot. Was that his goal? Was he prepared to sacrifice his own life in order to bring Anis down?

Before I knew it, I felt like my mind had waded into quicksand. It was too much.

And no one could say anything to ease my concerns. I stared at her worriedly, but she showed no sign of moving.

A heavy silence filled the air for the longest moment. Even the spectators in the audience had fallen silent, anxiously waiting to see how this situation would unfold.

Leghorn didn't move. He continued to stand there, his staff raised high, eyes squeezed shut as though deep in prayer.

What in the world was he playing at…?

The next moment, Anis started speaking to him. Unable to hear what they were saying from this distance, I used a little wind magic to pick up their voices.

"I said, what do you want? Can we resume now?" Anis demanded.

"Wh-why won't the spirits answer me…?! Why won't they give me a spirit covenant?!"

"Hey. Did you even hear what I said?"

"But why?! Why…?! Why do they look on *you*, a princess who can't even use magic, so favorably?! Your position! Your power! Everything about you—you're blessed! Why does someone the spirits aren't supposed to have chosen get everything she wants?! It isn't right!"

…Uh-oh. I could feel myself losing my temper with him all over again.

There was simply no helping this man. Even after everything that had happened, he was still possessed by his own delusions.

After a moment, Anis spoke up in response: “What isn’t right about it? If your wish for a spirit covenant truly came from the bottom of your heart, the spirits would answer you. That’s all there is to it.”

“H-how can you know that, when you can’t even use magic?!”

“Who exactly do you think I’m closest to?”

“Ugh… Why, why, why, why, why?! Why won’t anyone save me?! No one will! No one! I’m a noble, descended from a venerable lineage…!”

“If you want to appeal to your blood, you have to behave accordingly. Otherwise no one will acknowledge you.”

“Ugh! Ughhh! Uggghhh!”

“If you’re not willing to fight, then surrender! This is no place for prayers! If you don’t have what it takes, you should get out of here!”

“Auuuggghhh!” Leghorn screamed as he unleashed a magic attack.

Arrows of flame appeared in the air, shooting straight for Anis.

Any ordinary person would have been killed on the spot. I even noticed the knight serving as referee hurriedly retreat to a safe distance.

Screams sounded from the audience. Leghorn may have been an idiot, but his magic prowess wasn’t half bad.

Well, it was unfortunate for him that he was going up against Anis here.

With a swing of her Mana Blade, she brushed the fire arrows aside. In the end, not even a single one managed to reach her.

Leghorn continued to shout at the top of his voice, casting spell after spell. Anis stared back with pity in her eyes, standing firm against each oncoming barrage, knocking the blasts down one after the next. Even the spectators who had given in to panic fell silent.

A moment later, as if his strength had left him, Leghorn fell to his knees.

Anis, still standing across from him, looked down coolly.

“Do you surrender?” she asked.

“Haah… Haah… Haah…”

“If you can’t stand up, then forfeit.”

“…!”

“If you still have the strength to glare at me, get up. If you really want a spirit covenant, you won’t get one kneeling on the ground,” she said, returning his glare.

Leghorn shook even more violently at this. He couldn’t stand to maintain eye contact anymore.

“You want a spirit covenant? They’re not to be entered into lightly. You seem to think it would be a convenient way to get what you want,” Anis admonished him in a matter-of-fact voice. “Do you really understand the cost…? Do you even realize just how determined Euphie had to be to complete her own covenant? Have some shame! Don’t you dare underestimate her resolve!”

Silence reigned as Anis’s cry sounded all around, loud enough to be heard by everyone watching her.

I, on the other hand, had to raise a hand to keep my heart from leaping out of my chest. Anis’s words pierced my soul.

“Ugh… Ugh…!”

“If you can’t even speak, we can let the referee decide,” Anis continued.

“Ngh…! Ngh…!”

Leghorn was in no state to be answering questions.

Anis continued to watch him for a short while, then breathed a bored sigh.

“…You’ll have to go all out to survive in the south. If you work hard, with the determination to pull through, maybe the spirits will answer your wish next time,” she said, motioning to the judge.

The next moment, Leghorn fell to the ground, apparently unconscious.

The referee raced over to check his condition and, with a quiet shake of his head, declared Anis the winner.

A second later, an explosive roar of cheers resounded from the audience.

Anis, I noticed, shook in embarrassed surprise as she awkwardly left the field.

I had to stifle a laugh. Why was she so flustered…?

“Impressive. As to be expected of Commander Anisphia. She reminds me of you back in the old days, Sylphine. She has a certain mercilessness about her…,” Commander Sprout remarked.

“Matthew? Did I mishear you just now?” Mother-in-law asked.

“I—I didn’t say anything! Ah, you must be proud how much she’s grown!” The commander chuckled, averting his gaze.

Mother-in-law glared back at him for a long moment, then let out a quiet sigh. “Honestly… I understand she’s upset, but she didn’t need to act so recklessly.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it? This will do wonders to advertise her magical tools,” my father remarked.

“You’ve always got profit and advantage on your mind, Grantz…!” Mother-in-law grumbled.

“Come on, let’s all get along,” Father-in-law intervened.

While this exchange was going on, the former Count Leghorn was carried away from the tournament grounds, while the audience continued to cheer following Anis’s victory.

“…This is kind of embarrassing,” I heard her murmur—those words setting my heart aflutter.

How could I not love her? She was willing to accept me, my desires, my resolve with all her heart.

Ah. All I want is to hold you close, Anis.

ENDING

Apart from the small incident involving Anis and the former Count Leghorn, the tournament proceeded to its conclusion without any major disturbances.

To put it simply, Anis emerged as the ultimate victor. I had never doubted that outcome, so to me, it didn't come as any great surprise.

I couldn't say the same, however, for the person who took second place.

To my surprise, Baron Cyan was the runner-up. In other words, the final match had been between him and Anis. Much of the audience was taken aback by this development, seeing as neither contestant was capable of wielding traditional magic.

But it was difficult to find fault with the outcome, especially considering how intense the showdown between the two finalists had been.

Baron Cyan's reflexes were every bit as good as Anis's, but in the end, he ultimately succumbed to her unrelenting onslaught.

That did, however, bring with it the tournament's greatest surprise. Up until that final match, Anis had won most of her contests with a single blow. The fact that Baron Cyan had held his own against her for as long as he did was a testament to his skills and talent.

Frankly speaking, I thought the results exceeded all expectations. That these two had won first and second places would set the stage for the future. On top of that, the fact that those nobles fixated solely on magic had for the most part been eliminated in the first round only highlighted the utility and potential of magical tools.

And so I found myself waiting for the top three contestants to enter the room so I could offer them all a few congratulatory words.

“The winners are here, Your Majesty,” sounded a voice.

“Show them in, please,” I urged.

The attendant bowed his head.

As I waited for Anis and the two others to arrive, Father-in-law, sitting alongside me, let out a soft chuckle. “Do calm down, Euphyllia. You’re also here to bestow your blessings as queen. Remember that,” he cautioned me.

“…Yes,” I answered, slightly embarrassed.

“It’s rare to see you so restless,” my father observed.

“Don’t make a scene, Grantz,” Mother-in-law interrupted in my defense.

Well, it was only natural I was so eager to see her. Anis did win after all.

Though I had always known she would win the tournament, I was overjoyed that she had managed to do so without suffering any injuries. What was so bad about that?

At that moment, the door swung open, and in walked the attendant followed by Anis, the victor; Baron Cyan, the runner-up; and a middle-aged man who had placed third.

His name was Count Derrick Celadon, a knight from the north with dark green hair and soft yellow-green eyes. For some reason, his face broke into a joyous smile when he laid eyes on me.

“It’s been a long time, Queen Euphyllia,” he said. “I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“A long time…? Have we met somewhere before?”

I didn’t remember this man. Inwardly, I was a little flustered, but Count Celadon flashed me a warm grin. Strangely, Anis and Baron Cyan were also smiling.

Just what was so funny about all this?

“I apologize. You probably don’t recognize me, seeing as we’ve never properly spoken face-to-face. Allow me to introduce myself—I was the knight captain who took part in the dragon-slaying mission. Does that ring a bell?”

"…Huh?! From when we fought the dragon?!"

"You weren't expecting that, I'll bet," Anis said. "I was shocked when I heard he'd reached the semifinals."

I wouldn't put it past her to recognize an old acquaintance. Right, so this man was the knight captain from back then. Just as Anis said, I was truly surprised. I would never have foreseen us meeting again this way.

"Ah. If you helped subdue the dragon, you must have been responsible for defending the Black Forest, I assume?" Father-in-law asked.

"That's right, King Orphans. I still serve as a guardian of the forest. We were all immensely grateful for Princess Anisphia's and Queen Euphyllia's help during the dragon attack."

"It makes for a heartwarming story, but truth be told, my daughter decided to storm out alone to show off. It all turned out well and good in the end, but I'm sure she caused you no end of worry."

"No, it was no trouble. Actually, seeing her defeat it up close really inspired me. I'm glad to see my efforts since then got me so far today. Though Baron Cyan did best me in the end," Count Celadon said.

Baron Cyan shrugged his shoulders as he broke into a grin. "It was luck, that's all. Once you've got a proper handle on your own Mana Blade, I won't stand a chance against you."

"Don't be modest! People said all sorts of things when you first got your barony, but the proof is in the pudding! You've just demonstrated that the former king made the right call elevating you to the nobility! It's wonderful, really."

"Mm-hmm." Father-in-law nodded. "I'm pleased as well, Baron Cyan. It's reassuring to have you and your daughter supporting Anis and Euphyllia. I can breathe a sigh of relief."

"You honor me, Your Majesty. This is all thanks to Commander Anisphia. I'll continue to endeavor to live up to her expectations as lieutenant commander of the Magicology Guard."

“Ha-ha-ha! Who would have thought Lady Anisphia, who we first met at the Black Forest as a simple adventurer, would end up leading her own knightly order? Life sure is unpredictable!” Celadon chuckled, prompting Anis to let out a small laugh as well.

“I never thought I’d see you again here,” she said. “You certainly gave Navre a good workout.”

“Ah. It was a close call, my bout with him. Commander Sprout must be very proud. His son put in a remarkable performance.”

“Oh no, he still has a long way to go. I’ll have to do more to encourage him,” the commander answered.

As it happened, it was Navre who had lost out on receiving an award, coming in a close fourth after losing to Count Celadon.

Commander Sprout, who had watched the match with our group, wore a complex smile, equal parts happy and frustrated. I was impressed to see him muttering how Navre still had room to grow and how he needed to train harder.

Incidentally, Gark had also taken part in the tournament, but he ended up losing against Baron Cyan halfway through.

“I offer my sincerest praise for all the effort you put into your endeavors,” I said to the three victors.

“I’m honored, Your Majesty,” Count Celadon answered.

“My journey isn’t over yet. I’ll keep working hard to aim for greater heights,” Baron Cyan added with a deep bow.

A moment later, Anis broke into a proud smile as she, too, offered a slight bow.

“We’ll be holding a celebratory banquet later as a token of my appreciation,” I said. “I would like to offer some more words of congratulation at that time.”

“Thank you! Ah, the wine’s going to be delicious, isn’t it?! I can’t wait!” Count Celadon grinned eagerly.

The atmosphere remained light and friendly as we exchanged casual

conversation. I was particularly curious about recent developments in the northern region and the Black Forest.

There had been a decrease in monster activity before the dragon attack, but things seemed to have returned to normal now, and the knights were as busy as ever.

Even so, there were several pieces of happy news—such as Count Celadon's marriage to a woman he had met during the dragon attack.

"All of us in the north, especially those involved in taking down the dragon, sing your praises, Lady Anisphia. We've been surprised by all your successes over the past few years, but we're just as pleased as if they were our own. We have high expectations for the magicology city and your Magicology Guard as well. I hope we won't have to wait long to get more magical tools available in the north," the count said.

"I'll do my best to make it happen. Feel free to come visit us with your wife at the magicology city when you have time," Anis answered.

"I'd like to consider arranging some exchanges between our knightly orders. I suspect that will have to wait until after the magicology city is complete, but I'm hoping we can make it a reality."

"I'd like that as well," Anis said with a beaming smile.

Yes, this was a positive development.

It wasn't long, however, before that easygoing conversation drew to a close, and it was time for us to join the festivities.

"It's almost time. We'll head to the venue a little early. We'll see you soon," Father-in-law said.

"Yes. We won't be long," Anis answered.

"Make sure you see it through all the way to the end, Anis."

"Y-yes, Mother…"

"Take care of Anis for us, Euphyllia."

"Of course. She'll be safe with me."

Mother-in-law remained as concerned about Anis as ever, but eventually she let Father-in-law lead her to the venue.

Both my father and Commander Sprout left as well. From here on out, it was my job to offer congratulations.

"…Apologies, Baron Cyan, Count Celadon, but could I speak with you again there? I'll catch up with you shortly," I said.

"Huh? Euphie? Is something wrong?" Anis asked.

"Very well," Baron Cyan answered. "We'll go on ahead. Let's be off, Count Celadon."

"Hmm? Ah, all right. Got it. I'll see you later, then," the count added.

The two men, both seeming to grasp the reason for my request, offered quick bows as they strode off.

Before long, only Anis and I remained. Finally realizing I had wanted to give us a moment alone, she breathed a long sigh as she rested a hand against her forehead.

"Hey, Euphie?" she said, fixing me with a sharp look.

"Sorry, Anis. I couldn't wait any longer," I answered, embracing her in a tight hug.

I surrendered myself to her presence, letting her affection wash over me. Anis was visibly surprised for a moment, but she soon succumbed.

"…We have to go out in public soon. Don't do anything weird, okay?" she begged.

"…Let me stay like this a little while longer. Otherwise, I'm afraid I could lose control. I love you so much."

"You can be a little scary sometimes. I guess you're not giving me any choice, huh?" she said, wrapping her arms around me and gently patting me on the back as if comforting a small child.

"Anis?" I asked.

"What?"

“I love you.”

“I know.”

“I am so in love with you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“…You’re so important to me. You accept me for who I am; you want me for who I am—every little part of me.”

“…I do,” she said, embracing me in turn.

How I wished this moment in time could last forever…

I was delighted, happy beyond control, all because of her. There was no doubt in my mind—my existence, my soul, wanted nothing but her.

I never wanted to let her go. I wanted her more and more, and I wanted her to want me. I didn’t care how greedy it made me; my love for her knew no bounds.

“Stay with me. Forever,” I whispered.

“…You’re sure?”

“Even if the world won’t permit us to stay together, *I* will. I’ll make the world obey, if need be.”

“You’re sounding awfully scary lately…”

“I was thinking I shouldn’t hold back anymore.”

“Hold on. You’re saying you’ve been holding back till now? You’ve gotta be joking. Right?”

“You think you’re a joke to me?”

“…It’s not really the sort of thing I’d expect to hear you say.”

“You think I should put it another way?”

“…Huh?”

As we held each other close, staring into each other’s eyes, I realized Anis wore an almost pitiful expression.

Watching her filled me with immeasurable joy, and I couldn't help but flash her a smile.

"*You* want me with everything you have as well, don't you? You couldn't do anything to calm your racing heart," I said.

"…You're saying you've fallen in love with me all over again?"

"Yes. No matter how many times we're born and reborn, I want it to be with you."

"Now you're just exaggerating!"

"I'm not."

To me, Anis was every bit as important as my own life.

Because of her, I had learned how to love. Because of her love for the world, I had discovered a world that I wanted to love as well.

But if I were to lose her, everything would fade away. If society were to deny her, were to rob her of a place to be herself…I would create a new world that she could live in. Even if it meant destroying the current one. If she knew how I really felt, she might come to fear me. Perhaps deep down, she already realized it.

But if she felt the same way for me as I did for her…would she let me love her with everything I was? If so, I would be the happiest woman in the world.

And so, resting my face against her neck, I called out, pleading, "…Anis…"

"Hmm? What's the matter now?"

"Is it okay, for me to be happy?"

Please, give me the answer I need.

Would she let me live in a world where she was happy, too?

All I wanted was to be by her side, even if it meant other people fearing me. All I wanted was her love, her acceptance, and her forgiveness… If she rejected me, I would wither away like a decaying flower.

I wanted her to keep me by her side, to be a part of her life as naturally as breathing and drinking water to quench one's thirst.

“That’s a given. You *need* to be happy, Euphie.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t want to be the only one who’s found joy.”

…*Ah.* A shaky breath escaped my lips as relief and joy slowly flooded my chest.

Yes, I could breathe properly. I could live this life to the fullest here in this lovely world, with the person who brought me happiness beyond compare.

We gazed into each other’s eyes without saying anything more, until naturally our lips met.

I loved her so much that I could say with certainty that this was the natural order of things.

AFTERWORD

Piero Karasu here. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 8 of *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady*. I hope you enjoyed it this time around.

The seventh volume was all about Anis's story, so for this one, I wanted to center the tale around Euphie. Since we're following Euphie's point of view, I tried to bring out parts of the tale that haven't really been fully discussed from Anis's side. However, when I sat down to write, I had a good amount of trouble including everything.

At the same time, though, this was a good opportunity to reflect, so I'm really grateful I'm able to keep the story going. It's thanks to everyone's support that we've made it this far.

I think I mentioned in the last afterword that I've been reworking the tale somewhat compared to the web version. Well, the contents of this volume weren't touched on deeply in the web version, so the end result is a full-fledged story completely different from what you may have read before.

I was pleased to rewrite it, and it's an incredible honor, but it wasn't without its own difficulties.

While writing this work, I discovered there's still a lot more I want to bring out in the world of this tale. I couldn't be happier that I have the opportunity to keep going and further develop the story with this realization.

With the new year having dawned, I'm determined to make a fresh start and do my best to keep delivering new volumes that everyone can enjoy. I'm going to keep on developing the world of *Magical Revolution*, so I'm immensely grateful for your continued support!

Now then, I owe special thanks to Yuri Kisaragi for bringing out new surprises

in this volume's wonderful illustrations! Really, they're becoming more and more emotional with each new volume! Thanks also to my editor, for patiently sitting down with me through several consultations, and to my family and friends, for all your help with the writing. I appreciate everything you've all done!

Last but not least! I have another new work that came out on the exact same day this one did! *Madam Saint's Magic Is Progressive*! I put everything I had into writing it, so I'd love it if you could pick up a copy! With that said, I hope to see you again in the next volume!

Piero Karasu

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